

HOGARTH LECTURES ON LITERATURE

POETRY IN FRANCE AND ENGLAND

HOGARTH LECTURES ON LITERATURE
SERIES

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POETRY IN FRANCE AND ENGLAND

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POETRY IN FRANCE AND ENGLAND

INTRODUCTION

THIS is an essay in criticism of a hybrid and unorthodox variety, "*mélange adultère de tout*," æsthetic theory and impressionist appreciation masquerading as comparative literature. So fantastic a venture needs, perhaps, an apology. Comparative literature, that happy hunting-ground of the research student, is usually confined to the study of influences. But these are, in themselves, a matter rather of historic than of æsthetic interest; the common reader is concerned with them only in so far as they help him to understand more fully the ultimate production towards which they have contributed. For it is with races as with individuals; inevitably, the thought and art of one country are influenced by those of her neighbour; but, as inevitably, she makes her own those elements which she absorbs; and this process of transformation, far more significant than the preliminary borrowing, is too often neglected by academic critics. The real aim of comparative literature should be to bring to light those hidden forces, the essential characteristics of each race, which modify so profoundly every new element that comes within their reach.

I cannot pretend to have accomplished such an object in this brief essay. Here is no detailed study of mutual influence between the literatures of France and England, no complete historical survey of either, and no conclusive analysis of the distinctive character of either race. I have simply tried to look at the subject from a point of view which discloses more clearly than usual, it seems to me, parallels and divergences. My aim has been to trace, simultaneously, the evolution of poetry in France and in England, and to show how, at certain periods, the guiding principles of the art were alike in both countries, although the application of those principles was characteristically different; and how, at other times, each country follows an entirely independent line of development.

The adoption of this peculiar point of view presents a second problem, no less complicated than that of racial difference. For my concern is less with poetry in itself than with the "idea of poetry"; I have tried to discover, in each country and in each period, what the poets were trying to do, what the word *poetry* meant for them and for their generation; how far their conception of their art differs from that of their predecessors, and how far it resembles that of their contemporaries in the neighbour country. I have examined also the connection between each poet's theory and his practice. But is it possible to ascertain what a poet is trying to do? Poets differ widely in their competence as self-critics and as æsthetic theorists. Some, whether

in elaborate prefaces and apologies or in casual *dicta*, let us into the secret of their mental processes, or find the apt formula that sums up their ideal. Others appear unconscious of the significance of their experiments, or at any rate remain resolutely dumb as to their aims. I have not allowed myself to be daunted by their silence, since it is often where creative activity is most lively that the absence of theory is most conspicuous ; and one can deduce, from the work of art itself, the principles that guided its creator. Critics who are not poets have been left severely alone, save when (as in the Augustan period) they genuinely interpret the attitude to poetry of their generation.

Restrictions of space have necessitated a summary and often superficial treatment of complex problems and important writers, with much compression, generalisation and omission ; in so small a compass one can only hope to suggest points of interest. It has not always been easy to preserve a just balance between the rival literatures ; in general, more stress has been laid on that of France, as being presumably less familiar to English readers.

A rapid analysis of certain essential and permanent differences in the poetry of the two countries must precede historical survey and form the basis for all subsequent comparison—differences arising from the nature of the languages or from the mental characteristics of either race ; and here again I shall dwell with more insistence on the poetry of France.

The power and charm of English verse are due, in no small degree, to the freedom and suppleness of its prosody ; and this, in its turn, is the natural result of a language where stresses are strongly marked but not constant, and also varied in intensity, and where significant emphasis plays so large a part. On such staple forms as the eight- or ten-syllabled line, we can ring infinite changes of rhythmical effect, to which our system of "substitution and equivalence" (as Professor Saintsbury calls it) of syllable values, and our licence of *enjambement* contribute largely. In the blank verse of Milton and Shakespeare, for instance, the rhythm of the sentence runs against the original basic metre, like an elaborate counterpoint : indeed, with the later Shakespeare, one is only faintly conscious of the underlying ten-syllable structure, so complex is the pattern of stresses imposed upon it. And even in our most regular metre, the heroic couplet, where "correctness" precludes *enjambement* and syllabic substitution, variety is made possible by the different intensity of accents.

French verse knows no such liberty. The even, unemphatic flow of the language necessitates a stricter, more artificial system of prosody, which is welcomed and enforced by a nation enamoured of law and order. Every syllable counts equally in the line ; even that final unaccented *e*, which in everyday speech is mute, retains in verse its medieval privilege of independent value. An elaborate prosodic organisation ensures the smoothness, harmony and symmetry

of the *vers* and of the group, or sequence, of *vers* ; there are rules for the avoidance of hiatus, for the elision of *e* mute before another vowel, for the alternation of masculine and feminine rhymes ; there is a whole science of rhyming and of stanza-construction. The crowning glory of " Classical " French verse, from Ronsard to Valéry, is the alexandrine, wherein the light fluidity of the language is compensated by length and stateliness of line, and perfect symmetry is combined with subtle variety ; this point is too often missed by the foreigner, who raps out the twelve syllables and finds their regularity and their repetition intolerably monotonous. M. Thibaudet's interpretation is illuminating :

" L'alexandrin est fait non de douze ou treize syllabes . . . mais de quatre accents espacés, un dont la place, à la rime, est fixe, un dont elle l'est, à la césure, à peu près, deux dont elle est, dans le corps des hémistiches, presque facultative " (*La Poésie de Stéphane Mallarmé*, p. 254).

By this varying of stresses (for the stresses are distinct, though less marked than with us—like ripples in the surface of the line, scarcely perceptible to one accustomed to the splash and eddy of English) and by harmony and contrast of vowel music, of *timbre*, a subtler poetic method than alliteration, monotony is avoided. " Les fidèles à l'alexandrin," said Mallarmé, " desserrent intérieurement ce mécanisme rigide et puéril de sa mesure ; l'oreille, affranchie d'un

compteur factice, connaît une jouissance à discerner, seule, toutes les combinaisons possibles, entre eux, de douze timbres."

Four lines of Ronsard will illustrate these principles :

"Te regardant assis(e) / auprès de ta cousine
 Belle comm(e) une auror(e) / et toi comme un soleil,
 Je pensais voir deux fleurs / d'un même teint pareil
 Croissantes en beauté / sur la rive voisine."

The *timbre* music, the rhythmical variations are exquisite : the form is perfectly regular (feminine enclosing masculine rhymes, elision of *e* mute, cæsura after the sixth syllable). It would be difficult to apply M. Thibaudet's principle universally : we could find lines in which, even if the cæsura is not displaced, there appear to be more or less than two accented syllables in the hemistich. In general, however, for the typical alexandrine, it holds good.

Despite these aids to variety, monotony is an ever imminent danger in French verse, and artificiality an inherent defect which only the greatest masters can turn into a virtue. The Romantic emancipation from the Classical shackles was incomplete, limited to occasional displacement of the cæsura from the middle of the verse, and to greater freedom of *enjambement* ; in practice, mild use had been made of the latter for convenience or variety by all save the very strictest prosodists. Hugo, as he proudly tells us, dislocated "*ce grand niais d'alexandrin*" to make it more serviceable for

his tirades ; but Verlaine was the first who really shook all the stiffness out of the French *vers*, with his preference for supple irregular rhythms. Then Rimbaud, and the Symbolists after him, evolved the *vers libre* approximating to poetic prose.

Claudel, their modern representative, has launched a formidable attack on Classical prosody, of which Valéry is to-day the solitary defender ; rigid rules, a fixed form, declares Claudel, maim the original poetic impulse, lead to rhetoric and padding ; French moves with greater ease and power in prose. There is much truth in his assertions ; yet a complete adherence to his position would preclude appreciation of the most characteristic beauties of French poetry. For the rules, and the virtuosity which obedience to them involves, are dear to the French. Their ear has acquired an extreme fastidiousness ; they can even enjoy perfect versification quite apart from any other poetic quality ; as for instance in the verse of Malherbe. To us this mechanical perfection offers but poor pleasure, and seems a very negative virtue ; we require of verbal music that it should be intimately and directly connected with the poetic experience. And only the really great poets can fully satisfy this desire and, at the same time, the strict requirements of their prosodic system.

This brings us to consider what is perhaps the most elementary obstacle to the foreigner's enjoyment of French poetry : the difficulty of distinguishing lines poetically musical from those whose harmony is merely that inherent in the

language. For French is more obviously and easily musical than English ; it is hard to write really ugly lines in it, but correspondingly hard to write excitingly beautiful ones ; great subtlety of modulation is needed, cunning secret strengthening. English is heavier and harsher naturally, requiring a powerful poetic impulse to move musically ; but the effect, when at last it soars and sings, is all the more magical.

This fundamental difference between the two languages has far-reaching repercussions. The purity and unity of French has its disadvantages ; English can profit by its dual nature for effects of contrast and for shades of meaning. "The long words that we borrow," said Richard Carew in 1602, "being intermingled with the short of our own store, make up a perfect harmony, by culling from out which mixture (with judgement) you may frame your speech according to the matter you must work on, majestic, pleasant, delicate, manly, more or less, in what sort you please." The peculiar grandeur which the accumulated latinisms of Milton and Sir Thomas Browne convey to our unaccustomed ears, is as much beyond the reach of French as is the crude strength of Saxon monosyllables in Drayton and Donne, while Shakespeare blends Latin and Saxon with magical effect, e.g.

"In the dark backward and abysm of Time." ¹

The ways of English, however, are more subtle still ; we can clip and roughen out "borrowed"

¹ See G. H. W. Rylands, *Words and Poetry* (1928),

words, impart grace and beauty to our native stock ; the fusion is complete, the variety of effect inexhaustible.

English has a greater wealth of synonyms, each with its nuance and its associations ; it is at once more copious and more pliable than French. The wild word-coinage of the Elizabethans provided a heritage which was never wholly abandoned, and instilled a habit not readily lost ; the parallel movement in France provoked a violent reaction in the purism of Malherbe, and of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie*, which excluded Rabelais from the list of its authorities. "The language of the age," said Gray, "is never the language of poetry, except among the French, whose verse, where the thought or image does not support it, differs in nothing from prose." Gray was speaking for his own age, in which France was still under the influence of Malherbe's reform, whereas English writers consciously employed a distinct and elaborate "poetic diction." His remark would hardly hold true of other periods ; Donne and Wordsworth, for instance, can make poetry from the most prosaic words, whereas many French poets in the sixteenth and in the nineteenth centuries have cultivated a rich and unusual vocabulary. But the fact remains that English poets, thanks to the greater resources of their language, tend more than the French to use rare words or to invest familiar words with a new, or forgotten, meaning.¹

¹ See Owen Barfield, *Poetic Diction* (1928).

The difference between the language of poetry and that of prose lies, however, not only in the choice but also, as Coleridge, in the case of Wordsworth, demonstrated, in the order of the words. And in syntax, again, English is far more pliable than French, allowing for inversion and ellipsis for poetic effect. French, with a prosody as strict as that of Latin verse, lacks the Latin freedom of word-order; whole phrases may be displaced, e.g. :

“Booz s'était couché de fatigue accablé . . .”

“Au Cid persécuté Cinna doit sa naissance” ;

but no further infringement of the laws of syntax is allowed.¹ Correctness of language must accompany correctness of versification; a tyranny against which the Symbolists rebelled, with Verlaine's cavalier treatment of language and Mallarmé's deliberate distortion of syntax to set his words in a new light, “donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu.”

To this dissimilarity in the poetic material of the two countries there undoubtedly corresponds a difference of attitude in their poets, a different way of dealing with words. Mr. Humbert Wolfe in *English Bards and French Reviewers* claims for English poetry the “aeroplane touch”

¹ “La merveille est que, dans la poésie même, où toutes les langues ont plus de liberté, elle garde cet ordre autant qu'elle peut. Elle ne condamne pas à la vérité dans un poème héroïque les transpositions légères qui donnent aux vers de la grâce et de la force, mais elle condamne, dans toutes sortes de poésies, les transpositions violentes et qui rendent les vers rudes et obscurs” (Bouhours, *Entretiens*, 1671).

that sets the imagination soaring into an unknown empyrean, the "unsupported magic of words," and he makes his French interlocutor content with the "inevitable line," reflecting "clear conceptions flashed out at a white heat of creative certainty"; makes him, indeed, contemptuous of the power of words in themselves. This generalisation ignores the latest tendencies of French criticism and poetry. For since Baudelaire and the Symbolists, mystery and suggestion and verbal magic have been acknowledged as the essence of poetry; and these qualities, moreover, accompany clear Classical perfection in the verse of Baudelaire himself, in a line like—

"L'empire familier des ténèbres futures",

and in that of Racine. Such is the "unsupported magic" of the famous line—

"La fille de Minos et de Pasiphaë",

that the modern partisans of "pure poetry" have seriously argued that its power lies solely in its music; thus ignoring the obvious fact that the weight of meaning behind the words does not detract from their suggestiveness but enhances it. The distinction drawn by Mr. Wolfe contains, however, this much of truth: there is undoubtedly something in the language or in the national genius of France which has hitherto debarred her poets, with rare exceptions, from venturing on the highest flights of the imagination, although they may achieve perfection in their own way.

From the Elizabethans onwards, English poets have been free and bold with their imagery, thought naturally clothing itself in metaphor, and slipping with ease from one image to another. Their neighbours, for a long time, instinctively shrank from such licence, which shocked their innate passion for clarity and propriety¹; they liked poetry and logic to agree as far as possible; and their language, shaping itself after the pattern of their minds, became, from Descartes and Malherbe, the perfect medium for expressing clear thought. With the Romantic movement the imagination was let loose; Hugo uses metaphors exuberantly but too often impurely, for merely rhetorical effect, without the inevitable and illuminating force of Shakespeare. Partly for the same reason, partly from the nature of the language, the effect of "surprise" constantly recurring in English poetry (in the Elizabethans, in Donne and Marvell, in Pope), the unexpected word or image which suddenly radiates a curious light on its surroundings, is too seldom found in French poetry until Baudelaire and the *Décadents* deliberately cultivated it. More characteristic of France is that effect of polished felicity which may be called Classical, which

¹ "Ce qui fait voir plus que tout le reste la simplicité de la langue française, c'est que sa poésie n'est guère moins éloignée que sa prose de ces façons de parler figurées et métaphoriques. Les vers ne nous plaisent point s'ils ne sont naturels. Nous avons fort peu de mots poétiques, et le langage des poètes français n'est pas, comme celui des autres poètes, fort différent du commun langage" (Bouhours, *op. cit.* This Jesuit father is a perfect disciple of Malherbe).

comes from the impeccable choice and arrangement of words—often the simplest words—and of which our poets, too, can offer copious examples.

Great verse is scarce in France, and the clamorous rebellion of the Symbolists rose from a sense of this deficiency, Rimbaud and Mallarmé desperately striving to make those persistent enemies, logic and rhetoric, loose their strangling grip upon the imagination. And the effect of such a phenomenon as Rimbaud, and of Rimbaud's radical reform of the idea of poetry, was the more overwhelming because both were utterly unprecedented.

As we follow the course of poetry in the two countries we shall notice further recurrent characteristics, symptoms of deep-seated difference. Such is the artistic self-consciousness which is far more general with French than with English poets; the restless analytical French mind is constantly probing into the nature of poetry, examining its own mental processes, striving to find its formula. And there goes with this a disposition to form literary schools and *chapelles*; around each master who professes a new æsthetic theory there gathers a group of admiring disciples, who study his secret and see in him the embodiment of their ideal. This tendency, already marked in the Renaissance, is most clearly shown in the course of the nineteenth century. It does not come naturally to the English; æsthetic theories and literary cliques, with us, have generally been

due to foreign influence, as, for example, in the Augustan period. And whereas English poetry appears to thrive in isolation, to gather from hostility new strength with which eventually to assert itself, in France the man who tries to write in his own way, without the support of disciples or the approval of critics, is likely to find his efforts fruitless. This may seem a rash assertion in view of the *cas* Rousseau and the *cas* Rimbaud, both extreme individualists ; and yet each of these found his audience more than half prepared for him, and in each case, moreover, the next generation was to derive systems and theories from the practical example offered it. The most characteristic literary successes of France were achieved in the eminently social Classical period ; and even in the Romantic movement, when individual self-expression was held the chief end of poetry, it was only made possible by the co-existence of *cénacles* and organised literary groups.

These are a few of the most striking differences between the poetry of France and that of England, although a host of other facts of racial psychology might be discovered which contribute towards the ultimate dissimilitude. But *a priori* generalisation, beyond this point, is scarcely profitable ; it seems better and more interesting to let the poets speak for themselves.

CHAPTER I

THE RENAISSANCE

“ Comme on voit en septembre ès tonneaux Angevins
Bouillir en écumant la jeunesse des vins,
Qui chaude en son berceau à toute force gronde,
Et voudroit tout à coup sortir hors de sa bonde . . .
Ainsi la Poésie en la jeune saison
Bouillonne dans nos cœurs. . . ”

—*Ronsard.*

THE opening stage in the progress of modern poetry in either country reveals, clearly enough, certain characteristic differences in the national temper. The exuberance and enthusiasm, the passionate delight in beauty which belong to all Renaissance art are, in England, allowed full play ; in France, they are accompanied by a desire, imperfectly realised but clearly expressed, for balance, restraint and formal perfection. Elizabethan poetry is, in the fullest sense, Romantic ; that of Ronsard and his school is a nascent and tentative Classicism. This divergence is the more remarkable because the two movements have much in common ; they inherit from the Classics the same theory of poetry, they treat the same themes, they try similar experiments.

Poetry in France, on the eve of the Renaissance, was in a sorry plight. The pedantic versifiers of the fifteenth century, self-styled *Rhétoriciens*,

had reduced her to extreme poverty—they could only repeat the tedious allegories and commonplace saws they had inherited from the *Romance of the Rose*—and she lay bound in metrical fetters of the most rigid and mechanical type.

Against this state of things the young humanist-poets of the Pléiade rose up in revolt. The beauty of poetry had been revealed to them by their Classical studies; fervent patriotism, personal ambition and the example of Italy incited them to create, in their own language, a literature equal to those of Greece and Rome. The call to arms was sounded by Du Bellay in his *Défense et Illustration de la Langue Française*, 1549, a work which made history through its sheer enthusiasm and clamour; for after all, the movement in which the Pléiade claimed to be pioneers had already been begun by less uncompromising reformers, such as Marot. But to the enthusiast it is as irritating to see his aim half-achieved by another as to see it neglected; and Du Bellay is as patronising towards the efforts of his immediate predecessors as he is wholly contemptuous of the bulk of medieval literature.

History repeats itself in England a generation later. Richard Mulcaster, who taught Spenser at Merchant Taylors' School, echoes the Italian and French apologists of the vernacular; and Spenser undertakes a task of poetic reform closely corresponding to that of the Pléiade.¹ Not that the situations were identical; the

¹ See W. L. Renwick, *Edmund Spenser* (1925).

medieval tradition was less tyrannical in England, and Chaucer was great enough to be acclaimed as predecessor, while too remote to be a dangerous rival. An adversary peculiar to England, however, was the Puritan ; French poets did not have to vindicate the morals of their Muse until much later, during the wars of religion (witness Ronsard's quarrel with the Huguenots).

The parallel is close enough, however, to justify a comparison between the idea of poetry evolved by the Pléiade and that found in our own country. At the outset one fact strikes us, which is likely to prove a difficulty ; almost the whole creative and critical activity of France in our period can be summed up in the single name of Ronsard, while that of England flows into countless channels. Ronsard is the bright particular star of the Pléiade, Du Bellay and the rest being only paler satellites ; and except for the meteoric appearance of d'Aubigné, the Huguenot satirist, towards the end of the century, no rival appears to dim the lustre of the Vendômois poet. Contrast with this the "golden galaxy" of our great Elizabethans ! In criticism, too, after the *Défense*, which was evidently inspired to a large extent by Ronsard, the most important documents are that poet's *Art Poétique* and various prefaces ; whereas in England none of the great writers condescend to let us into the secrets of their art. Spenser's mysterious *English Poet* is not extant, and save for Sidney's vague *Apologie*, Campion's perverse attack on rhyme and Daniel's engaging defence of it, there

are no specimens of poetic criticism by poets at all. Our comparison will therefore be rather unfairly made between, on the one hand, the theory and practice of a single conscious and deliberate artist, supported by a clique of disciples, and on the other the scattered production of a large group, often more instinctive than analytical in temper.

The humanist exponents of the new poetry naturally went to the Classics for their main principles. The first of these is an intense reverence for their art, a firm faith in its sacred nature, strongly contrasting with the Rhétoriciens' view of poetry as a craft to be acquired by rule. Poetic inspiration, so mysterious in its nature, is one of the four kinds of "sacred frenzy" described by Plato in the *Phædrus* and the *Ion*; and this theory, as elaborated by the Italian neo-Platonists, is widespread in the Renaissance. (Plato, of course, was a dangerous ally for apologists of poetry, providing ample arguments on the other side also; and Sidney is forced to describe him as a poet *malgré lui*.)

Poetry, on Classical authority once more, is identified with the highest and purest kind of knowledge. It is connected with the somewhat vague Renaissance ideal of "virtue"; it is the fine flower of human excellence, springing only in the rarest and richest soil. "Les Muses ne veulent loger en une âme si elle n'est bonne, sainte et vertueuse" (Ronsard, *Art Poétique*). The first poets were priests and prophets, the first poetry "une théologie allégorique"; Sidney's list of the great poets of old is intended

to prove the same point. Poetry can only appeal to "les gentils esprits ardents de la vertu"; and these it can inspire yet further to "virtuous enterprise." Sidney, like other of his compatriots, lays excessive stress on the didactic aim of Poetry, in order to justify her against the accusation of the Puritans; while the whole purpose of Spenser's allegory is to sweeten the pill of his moral instruction, to teach while he delights; fortunately for us he was too great an artist to allow his lesson to spoil our pleasure.

Inseparable from this lofty conception of the poet's calling is the belief in the glory that is his by right. It runs through Classical literature from Homer onwards, and Renaissance writers since Petrarch had revived it. The poet is serenely conscious that his work has a value transcending earthly values; he can afford to disregard the praise or blame of his age (though he seldom does so!); he has created something that will live for ever and immortalise him:

"Not marble, nor the gilded monuments
Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme."

Horace and Ovid had given striking expression to this thought; it is constantly, and exultantly, echoed by Ronsard:

"Quand l'ennemi des hommes, le trépas,
M'assoupira d'un somme dur, à l'heure
Sous le tombeau tout Ronsard n'ira pas,
Restant de lui la part qui est meilleure.
Toujours, toujours, sans que jamais je meure,
Je volerai Cygne par l'univers . . ."

And on those whom his verses celebrate he is conferring an inestimable favour : they shall share his immortality. Thus Pindar had addressed the victors at the Olympic games ; thus Ronsard bargains with his noble patrons, offering undying renown in exchange for temporal reward ; thus every sonneteer from Petrarch onwards reproached his lady with ingratitude towards him that would " eternise " her.

We shall watch, throughout the centuries, the various interpretations which these long-lived principles of the Classical tradition were to undergo : the poet as philosopher, as prophet, as preacher are, notably, misleading notions on which many ridiculous pretensions were to be based. But to Ronsard, whatever he really believed about the didactic power of his poetry, the essential dogmas of divine inspiration and undying fame were more than mere clichés, they were intimate convictions ; they taught him to distinguish emphatically between the true poet and the mere *versificateur*. Poetry is not merely a question of arranging syllables (as Malherbe, later, was ironically to suggest) : " rimer de la prose en vers," without imagination and without art, is a crime of *lèse-majesté* towards the Muse : " La médiocrité est un extrême vice en la poésie," cries Ronsard, echoing Horace. Moreover, the importance attributed to the sacred gift of inspiration does not lessen, for the Renaissance theorist, the necessity for human effort. On the contrary : the poet is painfully conscious of the gulf that lies between the great message

he has received and his own powers of giving it to the world.

“ Mais je sais que mon art grèvement me tourmente,”

laments Ronsard. He must study and toil to become worthy of his calling, humbly strive to learn the secret of the great masters of old, seek criticism from wise judges in his own time, and be above all a merciless critic of his own work. This is the constant aim of Ronsard's teaching and practice : on it is based his theory of imitation ; and it is in so far as he attained this object that he deserves the title of a Classical artist. And it is remarkable that none of our poets before Milton, with the possible exception of Ben Jonson, was such an accomplished scholar, so ruthless a critic of his own work, as Ronsard.

The essential secret of Poetry, Ronsard knew, “ ne se peut comprendre ni enseigner.” About “ invention,” as Classical tradition called the first process of poetic creation, he gives us no illuminating hints, only a vague reminiscence of Aristotle's *mimesis* : “ Le but . . . du poète est d'imiter, inventer et représenter les choses qui sont, ou qui peuvent être vraisemblables.” This stress on verisimilitude, inherited from Italian critics, is significant, being the foundation of seventeenth-century doctrine. Elsewhere Ronsard condemns Ariosto for his “ poésie fantastique,” and Lucretius “ parce qu'il a écrit ses frénésies . . . et qu'il n'a pas bâti son œuvre sur la vraisemblance et sur le possible.” He warns the apprentice-poet not to “ extravaguer

comme un frénétique" ; sanity and truth are essential to poetic beauty ; " tu auras les conceptions grandes et hautes, et non monstrueuses ni quintessencieuses. . . ."

By these and many like injunctions, Ronsard sets French literature on the path of Classicism which, broad and generous with him, is to grow ever narrower with his successors. In England, romance and imagination accept no such limits ; the test of probability is not applied by the creators of Faustus and Tamburlaine, Ariel and Caliban ; the words of Theseus illustrate this principle of unbounded liberty :

" . . . As imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name."

With this restriction, however, French and English agree that the field of subject-matter in poetry is unbounded. " Toutes choses qui se peuvent imaginer," said Ronsard, all life, all learning, are grist to the poet's mill : " C'est un homme le quel comme une mouche à miel delibe et suce toutes fleurs, puis en fait du miel et son profit selon qu'il vient à propos."

Between the original imaginative process, or " invention," and style in the strict sense, or " elocution," lies a certain intellectual process, an ordering of thought and image, " disposition." This discipline is characteristic of Classical as opposed to Romantic art, and is markedly absent from that of the Medieval period. The

stress laid upon it by Renaissance theorists testifies to a true appreciation of certain qualities of Classical literature, which is not invalidated by the frequent failure of Renaissance poets to apply the same discipline in their practice. "Disposition," according to Ronsard, "consiste en une élégante et parfaite collocation et ordre des choses inventées, et ne permet que ce qui appartient en un lieu soit mis en l'autre, mais se gouvernant par artifice, étude et labeur, agence et ordonne dextrement toute chose à son point." It is for its formlessness, as much as for its fantasy, that Ronsard, following certain Italian critics, condemns the *Orlando Furioso*; he would no doubt have disapproved of the *Faerie Queene*, whose structure attempts, more or less successfully, a compromise between the romance and the epic. The severer qualities of design and restraint, indeed, are notably foreign to the poetry of the Elizabethans. In the drama, particularly, we see the triumph of Romantic freedom, indicating a strain of wildness in the Elizabethan temper averse to discipline, from without or within.

A question even more important to the Renaissance mind was that of "elocution"—of the choice and use of words. The *Défense* showed how inseparable were the two notions of the revival of poetry and the enrichment of the language. And to the end of his life Ronsard held the same principle: "Il est fort difficile d'écrire bien en notre langue si elle n'est enrichie autrement qu'elle n'est pour le présent de mots

et de diverses manières de parler." Towards this object the Pléiade poets strove, and their critical writings offer detailed suggestions for its attainment. But if the process was deliberate and consciously formulated by them, it was none the less already in being. Language in the sixteenth century, in every country, was in an extremely plastic state ; the sudden expansion of thought and knowledge, after the stagnation of the Middle Ages, inevitably brought about a sudden growth of new words and expressions. Everyone experimented with language, and the survival or disappearance of their inventions seems to have been governed by a purely arbitrary fate.

The most obvious and fertile sources of enrichment were the Classical tongues, and particularly Latin, into which plenteous stream word-makers had freely dipped from the earliest days of the Renaissance. Ronsard, because of the principles of the *Défense* and the pedantry of his early Odes, won from the purists of posterity the reproach of "speaking Greek and Latin in French" ; yet this is unmerited. Ronsard was too much of an artist, with too keen an affection for his native language, to allow humanistic fervour or the passion for innovation to mar his style. In 1565 he warns his disciples "de n'écortcher point le latin comme nos devanciers," by reaction almost proscribing neologisms ; and he invariably demands discretion, taste and respect for the genius of his own language.

Besides the right to pillage foreign lands, French has rich stores of its own from which to

draw. There are picturesque archaisms to be revived, derivatives to be formed by grafting on old stock ; there are the various dialects to be exploited. In both these cases, the efforts of poets failed to instil an artificial life into words already decaying or too obscure provincialisms ; yet the principle of *provignement*, grafting, proved fruitful when applied to roots whose life was not yet extinct.

In Elizabethan England a similar situation produced results characteristically different. The same need for enrichment was met with the same influx of new-coined latinisms, against which the judicious protested, while the acrimonious, such as Nashe and Harvey, flung the reproach of "inkhornism" at each other's head. But the process was not to be checked by protest or recrimination. Uncontrolled experiment produced many short-lived monsters, some pleasant freaks which we may regret, besides the mass which, for better or worse, we have retained. Almost equally portentous and equally condemned was the craze for archaisms : Spenser, probably following Ronsard's advice, "framed his style to an old rustic language" in the *Shepherd's Calendar*, and again, to some extent, in the *Faerie Queene*. The vogue for things "outlandish"—French, Spanish and Italian—affected the language no less strongly ; and good patriots protested on quite unliterary grounds. The point of view of conservative commonsense is put by Daniel : "We bewray ourselves to be both unkind and unnatural to our language,

in disguising and forging strange and unusual words, as if it were to make our verse seem another kind of speech out of the course of our usual practice, displacing our words, or inventing new, only upon a singularity. . . ." Yet Daniel, like Canute, is powerless to check the tide.

The achievement of genius amply compensates for the excesses of the unskilful, and in Shakespeare's use of language lies the justification of Elizabethan licence. He creates words as he goes along, to suit the need of the moment, and no less freely manipulates existing expressions by distortion, juxtaposition and bold change of meaning. In France, only the prose of Rabelais approaches in any degree to this ideal ; such audacity would no doubt have horrified Ronsard as it did "well-linguaged" Daniel.

Ronsard well knew that the essential condition of good style is not so much the number of words in the vocabulary as their aptness and expressive power. "Tu te dois travailler être copieux en vocables, et trier les plus propres et signifiants que tu pourras pour servir de nerfs et de force à tes carmes. . . ." He particularly condemns useless, padding epithets : "Tes épithètes seront recherchés pour signifier et non pour remplir ton carme ou pour être oiseux en ton vers." His problem is to combine economy with abundance ; he detests equally flatness and fustian, and inveighs against the poetasters who fall into one or the other extreme. His ideal, in his maturity, is Virgil, whom of all

poets he judges "plus excellent et plus rond, plus serré et plus parfait."

He wants to create his own poetic diction : "Le style prosaïque est ennemi capital de l'éloquence poétique." But he has none of the false shame, the shrinking from the exact term, that produced the *style noble* of a later age. He revels in vivid words wherever they come from ; he urges the poet to frequent artisans of all sorts and acquire from them picturesque technical terms, and above all to observe nature constantly and describe her accurately ; his poetry is to speak to the senses. Ronsard delights in rendering colour, sound and movement, in noting significant detail. And his poetry at its best has these qualities of clarity and firmness combined with sensuous concreteness. He is, no doubt, both flat and pompous, vague and diffuse in his odes and hymns, his official panegyrics and his tedious epic ; but he can show himself a master of style, and of a wide variety of styles. His verse has at times that naked simplicity which lets emotion shine through ; it has astonishing bursts of passion :

"Ha ! je vous aime tant que je suis fol pour vous !"

Elsewhere it displays all the cunning of a finished artist in words, exquisitely sensitive to their suggestive value ; it ranges from the delicate prettiness of his Anacreontics to the fiery vehemence of the controversial *Discours*.

It was part of Ronsard's deliberate intention to

enrich his style with all the figures of rhetoric which his Classical education had taught him—"figures, schemes, tropes, métaphores, phrases et périphrases éloignés . . . de la prose triviale et vulgaire"; and his poetic practice shows an advance from lavishness to discretion in the use of these. His worst excess is in periphrases: not that they are the clichés they later became, but rather, misled by erudition, he is over-lavish in obscure Classical allusions. And in his best period he recommends prudence: "Il en faut sagement user: car autrement tu rendrois ton ouvrage plus enflé et bouffi que plein de majesté." As regards metaphor, we notice a curious fact: whereas sixteenth-century prose, with Rabelais and Montaigne, with Du Bellay and Ronsard himself, leaps from image to image unrestrainedly, in verse metaphors are comparatively rare. Ronsard prefers the more logical method of the simile, or the elaborate Virgilian comparison. Occasionally he startles us by some such vivid concrete image as the apostrophe to the Huguenot:

"Ne prêche plus en France une évangile armée,
Un Christ empistolé tout noirci de fumée . . ."

but the scarcity of such metaphors makes them the more noticeable.

The rich chaos of Elizabethan poetry will hardly furnish any such clearly defined principles of diction and imagery. In Shakespeare alone we find every conceivable style; and what is there in common between the limpid simplicity

of the lyric and the thundering magnificence of Marlowe, the caressing loveliness of Spenser and Sidney's passionate directness? Nothing, perhaps, save their freedom, their exuberance; in this respect, as in every other, they are unchecked adventurers.

Spenser, who, as the pioneer of the new humanist poetry, followed the French in so many ways, offers perhaps the closest parallel to Ronsard in deliberate and delicate artistry; he sought to unite richness and clarity in his style. His commentator E. K. commends the "knitting of sentences" in the *Shepherd's Calendar*, as being "well-grounded, finely framed and strongly trussed up together." Conciseness of texture is hardly the virtue we should ascribe to Spenser's verse; we should praise, rather, its lovely luxuriance, its flowing languorous grace. These qualities may cloy; and despite its calculated variety of elaborate similes and descriptions, the *Faerie Queene* draws out its linked sweetness somewhat over-long. But in such a poem as the *Epithalamion*, the rich diction and imagery are perfectly controlled and organised, adapted to the varying phases of the emotion; and nothing in Ronsard conveys, to the same degree, the feeling of diversity in unity, of intense rapture flowering naturally into exquisite and appropriate ornament.

In general, however, this cunning and control are absent from the poetry of the Elizabethans, and they give an overwhelming impression of spontaneity and boldness. In the lyric, the problem of setting words to music bridle the

fancy ; a single emotion has to be expressed simply and briefly ; thus spontaneity is combined with an easy felicity. The songs of Campion, and those of many a minor lyricist, have a fresh savour and vigour that are absent from the more sophisticated and enervate verse of the French ; the secret of the difference lies perhaps in the inherent qualities of our language and our prosody, but it was the merit or the good fortune of the Elizabethan lyricist to exploit these qualities with effortless grace.

In their longer poems, however, in their sonnets and above all in the drama, our poets give their imagination free rein. They are spasmodic artists ; their verse is uneven, seldom consistently good ; they fall from heights of intense beauty to depths of grotesque absurdity, and then, undisturbed, soar again. The balance between experience and expression is destroyed ; the words are in excess of the thought and we are surfeited with sweetness or wearied with bombast, as, for example, by Marlowe ; or else the thought is too weighty for the words, and we have the obscurity of Shakespeare's later plays. We saw them experimenting ceaselessly in word-coinage ; they are as bold and as untiring in their experiments with imagery, never resting content with the exact, the apt expression, but straining language or filling it to bursting-point, ransacking the world for the rare metaphor that will shed new light on their thought, welcoming hyperbole for its own sake. There is something immensely exciting about their method ; it is a

perpetual voyage of discovery ; and yet, does not the element of " surprise " lose a little of its effect by accumulation ?

French poetry of the sixteenth century offers but one parallel to our wild Elizabethans : the Protestant Agrippa d'Aubigné, mystic, fanatic and soldier of fortune. Beginning as a follower of Ronsard, he broke away from the Pléiade tradition under the stress of civil war and religious enthusiasm ; in his long controversial poem, *Les Tragiques*, he rails and storms, piling satire on imprecation, revelling in horrors, but rising at times to visions of the purest beauty. Like the Elizabethans he is steeped in Biblical imagery ; in his rages and his ecstasies he speaks like a Hebrew prophet. Images flash out constantly, of all degrees from the single vivid metaphor to the expanded simile ; he mingles abstract and concrete—thus, describing the Massacre of St. Bartholomew :

" A l'heure où le ciel fumait de sang et d'âmes . . . "

In a powerful double image he pictures the Resurrection :

" Comme un nageur venant du profond de son plonge,
Tous sortent de la mort comme l'on sort d'un songe . . . "

He can concentrate a whole description in a single line ; showing, after the massacre—

" Les corbeaux noircissant les pavillons du Louvre . . . "

or communicating his apocalyptic vision of Paradise :

"L'air n'est plus que rayons, tant il est semé d'anges . . ."

D'Aubigné is Elizabethan in his worst as in his best qualities ; and French critics have condemned him accordingly. He lacks "art, mesure, goût," his style is "souvent trop concis," his sudden compressed metaphors defying logic ; at other times he is involved, grammatically incorrect. He was conscious of his carelessness, and justified himself : "Ce qui a été moins parfait par sa négligence vaut bien encore la diligence de plusieurs autres" ; and if we are Romantic enough to forgive grievous faults for the sake of startling beauties, we shall agree.

One other aspect of the poetic Renaissance remains to be considered ; the question of prosody and verbal music. Ronsard established the essential principles of French versification, before him only tentatively applied. He swept away the mechanical intricacies of metre, stanza and rhyme that had done duty for poetry with his predecessors the Rhétoriciens ; knowing that the rhythmical form must be closely connected with the imaginative experience, that it must not be a rigid ready-made mould, he selected and simplified the traditional forms so as to win for the poet's thought the maximum of liberty. Yet lest this freedom should degenerate into anarchy he devised his own scheme of regularity and unity, for he knew the value of restraint in stimulating and purifying invention : "La

bride de la contrainte arrête et refreint la première course impétueuse des fureurs et monstrueuses imaginations de l'esprit." The forms of strophe on which he experimented freely and often felicitously are too numerous to be detailed here ; his theory always urges the poet to consult the "jugement de son oreille," to put his verse to the test of recitation. The alexandrine, not unknown to medieval writers, is proclaimed queen of French metres, and Ronsard's consummate use of it proves his case. Both in theory and in practice, his attitude towards the prosodic rules which he has instituted is judicious and broad-minded ; he sees that they are only a means to an end, insufficient in themselves to ensure the beauty of verse. He can break them triumphantly ; cunning hiatus is the secret of the lovely picture of the rose :

" Mais battue ou de pluie ou d'excessive ardeur . . . "

and some of his happiest effects are due to varied stresses and to *enjambement*. (D'Aubigné, as in all else, outdared Ronsard in cross-rhythms and overlapping.)

But of Ronsard's rare sensitiveness to verbal music, we need give no further example than this extract from the *Élégie contre les bûcherons de la forêt de Gastine*, elaborately phrased and built up on variations of *e* and *o* sounds :

" Forêt, haute maison des oiseaux bocagers,
Plus le cerf solitaire et les chevreuils légers
Ne paîtront sous ton ombre, et ta verte crinière
Plus du soleil d'été ne rompra la lumière . . . "

Then he shows his skill at imitative harmony :

“ Tu deviendras campagne, et, en lieu de tes bois,
Dont l'ombrage incertain lentement se remue,
Tu sentiras le soc, le coutre et la charrue :
Tu perdras ton silence, et, haletants d'effroi,
Ni Satyres ni Pans ne viendront plus chez toi . . . ”

English verse in the sixteenth century underwent a transformation even more complete than French. The efforts of Wyatt and Surrey to substitute metrical regularity for the earlier doggerel had been only in part successful ; the adjustment of rhythm to pronunciation remained imperfect. It was left to Spenser to make the line flow smoothly and musically, and after groping for a while he arrived at a solution of the problem, combining liberty with control as Ronsard had done, weaving the supple varied rhythms of the spoken phrase over the fixed pattern of his metre. Like Ronsard, he invented many new metrical forms ; and with the *Faerie Queene* stanza he discovered, and employed almost unerringly, a form exactly suited to the purpose of his poem and to his individual music. For Spenser was more than an experimenter ; he knew the intimate connection of sound with sense, and showed how rhythm and harmony could reveal the poet's mind.

In his refashioning of English verse Spenser was undoubtedly influenced by contemporary developments in music. In the motets and madrigals of the sixteenth century, the musical phrase follows the spoken sentence in stress and

pause, without the rigid barring of later music, and is related to, and contrasted with, other rhythms playing above and below it. And it was probably from the composers that Elizabethan poets learnt to make their rhythms supple and varied without losing control, and to balance and bind together these contrasted rhythms so as to achieve a final effect of symmetry and harmony. The rich florescence of lyric that followed immediately on Spenser's reform is even more clearly due to the same influence. Campion, to take a single example, wrote both the air and the words of his songs ; and not only does the music fit the poetry to perfection, but the poetry has an intrinsic musical value that seems to render further support superfluous. The miracle has been worked by analogy, by contact. And if English music of the sixteenth century surpasses that of France in beauty, variety and complication, the Elizabethan lyric offers an ampler store of new and lovely rhythms than even Ronsard's fertile genius could supply. But here we touch, once more, that bedrock of linguistic difference which makes further comparison unjust and useless. For the same reason, we must omit all reference to that other great marvel of Elizabethan poetry, dramatic blank verse, which obviously has no parallel in France ; an absence in itself sufficiently significant. The tale of prosodic reform would be incomplete, however, without some mention of that curious error into which humanist enthusiasm led the poets of both countries : the attempt to write

in quantitative metres. For different, but equally conclusive reasons, French and English are unsuited to the Classical system of prosody, and so the best minds discovered ; of Pléiade poets, only the pedant Baïf remained constant to the scheme, while in England it gave rise to endless controversy, culminating in that odd duel where Campion, skilled practiser of the natural English system, turns to abuse his art ; a *volte-face* not wholly unprofitable since it gave us the exquisite freak, "Rose-cheek'd Laura, come," and called forth the judicious *Defence of Ryme* from Samuel Daniel.

Music and metre, diction and imagery, style and structure ; such are the varying aspects from which the poetic problem presents itself and the men of the Renaissance. And meanwhile there is to us something strangely lacking in their creed : the modern notion of originality, of poetry as self-expression. "Imitate the Classics" is the refrain of the *Défense*, and Du Bellay, though inveighing against mere translation, never explains adequately how far imitation is compatible with originality. The humanist tradition instilled the notion of distinct *genres*, each with its archetype among Classical authors and its themes and its rules deduced from their practice ; the epic or "heroic poem" topping the list, with tragedy a near second, then lyric in its various forms, and the eclogue or pastoral, and last the "épigrammes, sonnets, satires, élégies et autres tels menus fatras," as Ronsard contemptuously calls them, inferior

forms *per se*. The dangerous conclusion might be drawn, that imitation of good models and observance of the established rules of each *genre* are sufficient to make poetry. And the peril was not always avoided. But the practice of the best poets of either country shows the gradual solution of the problem. Ronsard and Du Bellay begin by slavish imitation, whether of Pindar, Horace or the Italians, only sometimes in their style, or in details of description, betraying individuality. Then, eventually, in each case comes a reaction; the ego asserts its rights. Du Bellay gives us his *journal intime* in verse, the *Regress*; Ronsard turns against his Protestant accusers in fiery vindication of his life and art. And between the two extremes lie infinitely varied gradations; where Ronsard most appears to be speaking from the heart, in the tender naïve sonnets to his peasant mistress Marie or the poignant elegies on her death, he is echoing Anacreon or Petrarch or the neo-Latin Marullus. Similarly, Spenser's *Epithalamion*, for all its vibrant passion, is modelled on the elaborate marriage-songs of Catullus and cast in the complex mould of Petrarch's *canzone*.¹ Buffon's overworked dictum was never truer than here; style is the inimitable thing; one touch of the magician's wand transforms the well-worn theme into something individual and unprecedented, takes some trite image, say the rose as symbol of perishable youth and beauty, and revives it in countless fragrant and brilliant forms.

¹ See W. L. Renwick, *op. cit.*

The themes of Renaissance poetry are common stock ; they spring from the Renaissance attitude to life, which is one of conscious and intense delight in its complex joys ; a frank pagan sensualism on the one hand, the body free at last after the long tyranny of medieval asceticism ; the pleasures of the unfettered intellect, exploring the universe ; rapture of the spirit too, of a spirit not divorced from matter but attaining, through delight in earthly beauty, to visions of an ideal. Our poets sing of love in all its aspects, its fires and pangs and pleasures ; they praise the beauty of the world, they give full utterance to their passionate desire to live and to enjoy life ; and ever and again there comes the inevitable sense of impermanence, the agonised shudder at the thought of annihilation, which all the promises of religion cannot calm. And on these themes, common because they are so vital, each poet sets his individual impress, weaves his design of thought and feeling and imagery.

CHAPTER II

THE LATE RENAISSANCE

"A good poet's made as well as born."

—Ben Jonson.

WITH the end of the century, the Pléiade tradition goes to seed. Its prettiness and its Petrarchism have a late flowering in the fluent, affected sonnets of Desportes ; its verbal experiments are reduced *ad absurdum* by the clumsy Du Bartas, author of an epic on the Creation. But the finer qualities of Ronsard's poetry—its intensity and vigour of expression, and that formal elegance towards which Ronsard, with partial success, was striving—are absent from the verse of his successors. The one great poet of the age, D'Aubigné, remained unknown, in exile ; his splendid *Tragiques* were published posthumously, too late to win him a disciple.

A reform was essential, and its direction probably inevitable, given the race, the *milieu*, the moment ; but the final responsibility rests on a crabbed Norman pedant :

"Enfin Malherbe vint, et le premier en France
Fit sentir dans les vers une juste cadence ;
D'un mot mis en sa place enseigna le pouvoir,
Et réduisit la Muse aux règles du devoir."

One cannot dissociate his name from Boileau's over-quoted appreciation of his herald ;

Malherbe, less pontifical and less intelligent than the "legislator of Parnassus," plays the part of a *gendarme* in literature, enforcing negative commandments, "reducing the muse to the rules of duty" and fatally fettering her, some think, in the process. Though he left no body of doctrines, his disciples eagerly gleaned his *dicta*, while the famous and ruthless Commentary on Desportes, and Malherbe's own verse, teach his lesson more clearly than pages of didactic eloquence. There is a Malherbe legend, and a not incredible one; but whether or not he really drew his pen through the whole of Ronsard's poetry lest he should be thought to approve any of it, and rebuked his nurse, on his deathbed, for a fault of grammar, the stories are significant and reveal the man. With Malherbe the whole conception of poetry alters and contracts. He dismisses the high-flown Renaissance notion of inspiration, and esteems his art a trivial *divertissement* requiring only a certain skill. The cult of imagination is an excuse for talking nonsense; reason must reign supreme; the difference between prose and poetry is a matter of syllables and rhymes.

Part of his effort, therefore, is concentrated on prosody; the laws which Ronsard had discovered by a happy instinct are codified and made more stringent, while the copious diversity of lyric stanzas invented by Ronsard are sifted down to a few simple forms. Rhymes must be rich, and satisfy the eye no less than the ear; the alexandrine must invariably split after the sixth

syllable ; there must be no *enjambement* nor even a running-on of the sense into the next line. Any hiatus makes him shudder. Smoothness, firmness and symmetry are his ideal, and his own verse often attains them ; but they are qualities which can belong to a machine.

Malherbe's view of poetic diction follows naturally from his primary attitude. He rejects the *style à part* of the Pléiade in favour of the ordinary language of polite conversation, flinches before a "plebeian" expression and condemns wholesale the rich store from which the Pléiade hoped to "illustrate" their language—archaisms and provincialisms, technical terms, neologisms and composite epithets. By this sterilisation of the poetic vocabulary, he lays the foundations of that colourless and abstract *style noble* with which Racine was to work such miracles and lesser men perpetrate such dismal horrors.

Besides this purity, he demands clarity and precision of expression ; and with the meticulous malice of a spiteful schoolmaster he annotates the slovenly writings of Desportes, pouncing on obscurities and redundancies, on faults of grammar and syntax, fiercely commenting "sottise," "ridicule," "bourre," "cheville" (padding), or deleting whole lines ; and we are left bewildered, sharing his disapproval if not his fury, and yet conscious that his view of poetry is narrow and superficial, that the enraged "*je ne vous entends pas*" which he scribbles beside some blurred metaphor of Desportes, if per-

fectly justified in that case, would as unhesitatingly be subscribed to the subtle analogies, the audacious flights of greater poets ; that on our Shakespeare, for instance, Malherbe's strictures would anticipate those of Thomas Rymer.

Certain contemporaries rebelled. Régnier, the lively satirist, nephew of the maltreated Desportes, protested in the name of nature against this usurpation of poetry by pedants. For if the Pléiade had insisted on the necessity of art they had also allowed nature her share in the formation of a poet ; and Malherbe's teaching, so acceptable to the uninspired, seemed to reduce genius to the art of taking pains. Régnier echoes Ronsard's contemptuous condemnation of the *versificateur* posing as poet :

“Cependant leur savoir ne s'étend seulement
Qu'à regratter un mot douteux au jugement,
Prendre garde qu'un *qui* ne heurte une diphtongue,
Épier si des vers la rime est brève ou longue
Et laissent sur le vert le noble de l'ouvrage.
Nul aiguillon divin n'élève leur courage ;
Ils rampent bassement, faibles d'inventions . . .”
(*Satire IX.*)

Régnier, in fact, rushes to the other extreme, and deprecates the taking of pains, ignoring that side of Ronsard's teaching. He takes pride in writing at the impulse of inspiration : “laisser aller la plume où la verve l'emporte,” is his chosen method, and he does not care if his *verve* lets him come a cropper at times ; he delights in his unevenness : “Du plus haut au plus bas

mon vers se précipite." And his verse is as he describes it, spontaneous and original, with flashes of imaginative power, but careless and unpolished.

A younger poet, Théophile de Viau, took up, after Régnier, the defence of unregulated genius :

" Mon âme imaginant n'a point la patience
De bien polir les vers et ranger la science ;
La règle me déplaît ; j'écris confusément.
Jamais un bon esprit ne fait rien qu'aisément."

Broadminded enough to appreciate the real value of some of Malherbe's grammatical reforms and poetic achievement, he yet refuses to submit to his, or any other, yoke : " J'aime sa renommée et non pas sa leçon." Théophile was an independent spirit, not a reactionary echoing the doctrines of an earlier generation ; he deliberately abandoned the battered ornaments of the imitators of antiquity, declaring that poetry requires a fresh and individual outlook ; that the Malherbe school, eschewing the one, lacked the other. " Les esprits faibles . . . de la discrétion qu'ils ont eue d'éviter les extrêmes redites, déjà rebattues par tant de siècles, se sont trouvés dans une grande stérilité, et n'étant pas d'eux-mêmes assez vigoureux ou assez adroits pour se servir des objets qui se présentent à l'imagination, ont cru qu'il n'y avait plus rien dans la poésie qu'une matière de prose, et se sont persuadés que les figures n'en étaient point et qu'une métaphore était une extravagance."

His own poetry suffers, no doubt, from the lack of discipline which his *poétique* involved ; much of it is diffuse and careless, as that of the Pléiade—despite Ronsard's good intentions—had often been. And yet he has this essential freshness and imaginative power ; he brings to the description of nature a keen sensitiveness to atmosphere and detail ; he is master, when he chooses, of a verbal music which can rival Malherbe's for sonorous symmetry, but which is most often delicately voluptuous.

“ Dans ce val solitaire et sombre
Le cerf qui brame au bruit de l'eau,
Pendant ses yeux dans un ruisseau,
S'amuse à regarder son ombre . . .
Un froid et ténébreux silence
Dort à l'ombre des ormeaux,
Et les vents battent les rameaux
D'une amoureuse violence . . . ”

(*La Solitude.*)

A poet of the same lawless temper, with a gift for melody to equal Théophile's, with less of his intimate charm but with an individual strain of fantasy and grotesque humour, was his younger contemporary Saint-Amant, author of another *Solitude* in which is heard even more clearly that note of romantic melancholy familiar to English ears in *Il Penseroso*. Saint-Amant excels at picturesque description ; he delights in all the aspects of nature, and is surely almost the only poet of his generation to find beauty in a winter landscape :

“ Ces atomes de feu qui sur la neige brillent,
Ces étincelles d’or, d’azur et de cristal
Dont l’hiver, au soleil, d’un lustre oriental
Pare ses cheveux blancs que les vents éparpillent ;
Ce beau coton du ciel de quoi les monts s’habillent,
Ce pavé transparent fait du second métal,
Et cet air net et sain, propre à l’esprit vital,
Sont si doux à mes yeux que d’aise ils en pétillent.”
(*L’Hiver des Alpes.*)

Here, one would have thought, was a lyric vein capable of redeeming the fallen fortunes of French poetry ; yet it was quickly exhausted. Only the less interesting side of Saint-Amant, his burlesque manner, won followers ; the music and the melancholy, the personal note and the feeling for nature, are found no more, save here and there in La Fontaine, till the end of the eighteenth century.

The failure of these two remarkable poets is due, no doubt, to their independence at a time when, as Brunetière says, “ la tendance des esprits était éminemment sociale ” ; an age whose primary requirements were order and uniformity, the age of the first *salons* and of the foundation of the Academy. Moreover, both show at times a deplorable lack of humour and of taste ; they indulged in precious and absurd conceits, which jarred upon a generation in whom “ l’esprit classique ” was maturing. Pending the final triumph of Classicism, poetry becomes a social institution ; it is taken over by the *salons*, where it degenerates into *vers de société*, trivial compliments and epigrams, perhaps

enlivened by a spark of far-fetched wit. Are we to look for it, as an alternative, in the drama? The forceful rhetoric of Corneille can hardly count as true poetry. He has crashing lines, resounding tirades. But with all the emphasis of D'Aubigné he lacks the latter's vividness; and he has not the subtlety of Racine in giving abstract words poetic significance. He appears too often to be vainly struggling towards metaphor; the images remain vague and shapeless:

“Que de soucis flottants, que de confus nuages
Présentent à mes yeux d'inconstantes images !
Douce tranquillité, que je n'ose espérer,
Que ton divin rayon tarde à les éclairer !
Mille agitations, que mes troubles produisent,
Dans mon cœur ébranlé tour à tour se détruisent ;
Aucun espoir n'y coule où j'ose persister ;
Aucun effroi n'y règne où j'ose m'arrêter . . .”
(*Polyeucte.*)

This is half-way to poetry; that it falls short of the real thing is due, in a large degree, to the restrictions imposed by the dramatic and poetic tradition of the day, which cramped a vigorous and naturally imaginative genius.

In Renaissance England the poetic impulse had been more powerful and more fertile; the neo-Classic victory, though inevitable, was more hardly won. The various streams of the Elizabethan tradition flowed on, gradually, and sometimes hardly perceptibly altering their course. The vein of allegory, pastoral and lyric is con-

tinued by Browne, Drummond, Giles and Phineas Fletcher ; their music is as sweet, their imagery is as fresh as those of any of their predecessors. In dramatic poetry alone a decline is visible, of which the amorphousness of blank verse is a symptom ; but how can we complain of a movement which, after giving us Shakespeare, can still yield the sweet luxuriance of a Fletcher, the sombre splendour of a Webster ? Yet a change was imminent, and the disintegration of the old tradition is the work of two poets, men of powerful individuality and of very different temper, exact contemporaries : Jonson and Donne. The former had the more immediate influence, an influence which for its direction and its significance has been likened to that of Malherbe. The comparison must not be carried too far ; Jonson was wiser than Malherbe, more sensitive to poetry, himself a greater poet ; and he could not, if he would, have stifled poetry in England as Malherbe did in France. He might with equal justice be compared to Ronsard in his more self-conscious and critical mood.

Jonson's literary doctrines were lifted whole from the Classics, chiefly from Horace and Quintilian ; yet they are a valuable revelation of his own personal taste. This is against the licence and extravagance of Elizabethan poetry, which find their full vindication in Shakespeare. Just as in the drama Jonson's ideal is the structural strength and dignity of the Classics, which he longs to attain through obedience to "the rules," so in all poetry he demands simplicity,

restraint, a sense of form. Reason, and not the treacherous imagination, must guide the "true artificer," lest he "depart from life and the likeness of truth." The term "artificer" is characteristic; woe to the genius who, like Shakespeare, "lacks art," who has not "in his own power the rule of his wit"; and for the attainment of this "art" the apprentice-poet is offered the old advice, Quintilian's, Ronsard's, "to read the best authors, observe the best speakers, and much exercise of his own style." In the old controversy of "art versus nature," Jonson stands between Ronsard and Malherbe; more distrustful of inspiration than the one, he never goes to the desperate extreme of the other; he can still find glowing words to praise Shakespeare, and can allow exuberance to be a lesser fault than aridity.

In the matter of poetic diction, he inclines to the Malherbe attitude. He blames in the dramatic poetry of his day "such impropriety of phrase, such plenty of solecisms, such dearth of sense, so bold prolepses, so ract metaphors"—comments, echoing Seneca, that "wantonness of language is the note of a sick mind"; and his ideal of "pure and neat language, though plain and customary," is not far from Malherbe's; though the English of Jonson and his school is of a richer and robuster texture than the *style noble* of seventeenth-century France. He does not wholly ban word-coinage, provided custom be always consulted. He allows metaphors, though he would have them used judiciously;

Malherbe's prosaic mind would label the choicest image "sottise."

There was undoubtedly a streak of the pedant in Jonson, and certain notorious denunciations have a Malherbian ring; the strictures on Shakespeare, for example; "Donne for not keeping of accent deserved hanging"; "Spenser in affecting the ancients writ no language." But he redeems these errors by the positive value of his lesson; by revealing, in precept and in practice (in his lyrics and epitaphs), the secrets of structure and restraint which he learnt from the Latin poets, retaining unimpaired the while his heritage of Elizabethan freshness and vigour; and he is justified, further, by his posterity, since Herrick, his friend, claimed him as patron saint.

Jonson's influence might be traced in dramatic poetry, where the "racket metaphors," the audacity and complexity of Shakespeare's diction give place to a simpler and more lucid style with Beaumont and Fletcher, in whose plays, for Dryden, "the English language arrived at its highest perfection." But the most fruitful field of poetry, during this period of transition, is undoubtedly the lyric, and it is there, as Herrick's name reminds us, that Jonson's influence is seen at its best.

In Herrick's verse is consummated the perfect union of the earlier lyric with its spontaneity and fresh charm, and the new principle of careful and cunning artistry. The old quarrel between nature and art seems futile indeed when we are faced with such a poet, gifted with an almost

unerring instinct for the right and rare in rhythm and expression, and who achieves perfection with unconscious ease. In tone and temper and also in the final effect of delicate, felicitous exactness, Herrick reminds us of Ronsard—though of one aspect of Ronsard only. Take, for instance, the delicious aubade (a traditional theme) :

“ Marie, levez-vous, ma jeune paresseuse,
 Jà la gaie alouette au ciel a fredonné,
 Et jà le rossignol doucement jargoné,
 Dessus l'épine assis, sa complainte amoureuse.
 Sus debout, allons voir l'herbelette perleuse
 Et votre beau rosier de boutons couronné . . . ”

and compare Herrick's May-day invitation to Corinna—more leisurely, more crowded with picturesque imagery, but in the same key :

“ Get up, sweet slug-a-bed, and see
 The dew bespangling herb and tree . . .
 When all the birds have matins said,
 And sung their thankful hymns . . . ”

Herrick, as befits an English poet, has more fancy, more of the unusual phrase. Ronsard's lament over the flight of time is moving through its simplicity :

“ Le temps s'en va, le temps s'en va, Madame,
 Las ! le temps non, mais nous nous en allons,
 Et tôt serons étendus sous la lame . . . ”

But Herrick refines on this plainness :

“ So, when or you or I are made
A fable, song or fleeting shade,
All love, all liking, all delight
Lies drown'd with us in endless night . . . ”

The difference is slight, but it is there ; and it is more than a difference between individual poets. On the other hand, Herrick has a shorter range, and he remains an unambitious “ traveller in little things ” ; he cannot reach the powerful and majestic music, the fierce intensity of some of Ronsard's alexandrines. Yet the comparison has this advantage : it points the contrast between Malherbe and Jonson ; that anything so exquisite as the *Hesperides* should flourish as a result of Jonson's pruning is all to the credit of the English gardener, and proves, moreover, the superior richness of the soil of English poetry.

· We shall look in vain in France for any parallel to the movement which sprang up meanwhile. For “ metaphysical ” poetry owes its character in great part to the peculiar genius of one man—John Donne. Rebelling, like Jonson, against certain excesses of his time, he substituted for them no Classical ideal of order and restraint, but excesses of another kind ; he acknowledged no law but his own temperament. He is with Jonson only in this, that he prefers direct and homely speech to the flowery diction of his contemporaries. They had loved language for its own sake ; Donne's concern is with the

intellectual processes which language is to communicate. Not that in this he stood quite alone ; Shakespeare apart, Sidney and Drayton in certain sonnets, and Webster at times, had anticipated Donne's startling directness, his abrupt vehemence of expression.

But it was against the artificiality of the Petrarchist convention and against the uniform sweetness and prettiness of the Elizabethan lyric that Donne rebelled. He shares with his contemporaries a taste for conceits, but it takes a very different form. They were content to go on embroidering a set of conventional symbols, often having no connection with genuine feelings, meaning nothing ; Donne looks to the strange lore of the Middle Ages for images in which to express his complex mental experience, showing subtle ingenuity of analysis and illustration. Even where the starting-point is some familiar conceit, such as the bracelet of his lady's hair worn by the lover, celebrated *ad nauseam* by the Petrarchists, Donne's development of the theme is a maze of unexpected thoughts (*The Funeral*, *The Relic*).

Poetry so packed with thought does not flow with the limpid ease of the earlier lyric ; the old music serves no longer. So Donne experiments unceasingly with metre, like Shakespeare in his later plays, striving (as Professor Grierson says) "to find a rhythm that will express the passionate fullness of his mind, the fluxes and refluxes of his mood." Sometimes, especially in the *Satires* (where, however, Classi-

cal precedent was supposed to authorise a certain roughness), his verse is unbearably harsh and rugged ; yet in the *Songs and Sonnets* and the *Elegies* he often achieves wonderful effects of rhythmical beauty, the more exciting that one feels sound is deliberately kept the servant of sense.

Donne's amazing revolution in poetry has no sort of equivalent in criticism. Neither he nor his followers care to explain, or justify, what they are trying to do. Indeed, explanation would have been unnecessary ; the experiment speaks for itself, and it is difficult to believe Donne unconscious of its nature and significance. The comments of contemporaries are lacking (the *Songs and Sonnets* remained so long unpublished) ; Jonson gives cautious praise to "the best poet in the world for some things," and quotes one vivid couplet, but condemns the rugged metre and the obscurities. The nearest approach to criticism is in Carew's *Elegy* on Donne :

"The Muses' garden, with pedantic weeds
O'erspread, was purged by thee ; the lazy seeds
Of servile imitation thrown away,
And fresh invention planted. Thou didst pay
The debts of our penurious bankrupt age
. . . and open'd us a mine
Of rich and pregnant fancy, drawn a line
Of masculine expression . . ."

Here the disciple, in terms not so different from Théophile's outburst in defence of originality, appreciates the novelty and fertility of his

master's experiment, but does not analyse its peculiar characteristics.

So individual a poet as Donne might appear a dangerous guide to follow ; and in France he would have met with little favour. And yet Donne's complex genius shed its influence on men of the most various temper and talent, sometimes stimulating them to develop on their own lines, as with Marvell and the mystics, sometimes merely providing a manner to imitate. The worst result of his influence is the abuse of metaphysical "wit," a dangerous instrument when unaccompanied by keen intelligence ; fantastic analogies are sought for their own sake and not as the necessary rendering of a complicated thought ; not seldom in his own poetry, and far oftener in that of his school, wit deviates into grotesque absurdity. But in other ways his influence was to the good ; it shifted the focus of interest from the form to the substance of poetry ; it quickened thought, and showed that a strange idea could be rendered in simple language, that feeling could be dissected and analysis made passionate.

There is no space here to dwell on particular poets of this school, even when they are of the rare quality of Marvell, Vaughan and Crashaw, who are so much more than mere "metaphysicians." Our goal is the ordered park of Augustan poetry, and we may not linger in the byways down which Donne's influence invites us. Yet, on the very threshold of neo-Classicism, we are faced with one immense individual achievement

which cannot be ignored ; a giant builds up, unaided, a Classicism of a very different type. It is impossible here to attempt an appreciation of Milton's mind or genius ; and we can only indicate his attitude to his art and suggest its significance.

Milton's conception of poetry is an inheritance from the theorists of the Renaissance.¹ Like these he was steeped in Classical literature ; as a youth he loved, and imitated in their own tongue, Virgil and Horace ; he read Dante and Petrarch, and wrote in Italian. From his undergraduate days he had vowed to consecrate himself to poetry, and to the highest form of poetry ; and his attitude to his calling is that of the Renaissance, fervent, reverential, not a mere literary convention but the expression of his deepest nature.

With the solemnity of a candidate for initiation he tells himself that " he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem, that is, a composition and pattern of the best and honourablest things." This belief in the poet's virtue he inherits, after Sidney, Spenser and the Pléiade, from the Classics. For he, too, believes in the sacred nature of inspiration : " these abilities, wheresoever they are found, are the inspired gift of God, rarely bestowed " (whence follows the responsibility of the chosen vessel to keep himself worthy of that gift) ; he believes in the power of poetry " to imbreed and cherish in a great people the seeds of virtue and

¹ See E. M. W. Tillyard, *Milton* (1930).

public civility, to allay the perturbations of the mind, and set the affections in right tune." And with the sense of the dignity of his vocation and the magnitude of his undertaking goes inevitably that personal pride, that thirst for immortality which was an essential feature of the Renaissance : " I might perhaps leave something so written to after-time, as they should not willingly let it die." Compare *Lycidas* :

"Fame is the spur that the clear spirit doth raise. . . ."

His "inward prompting" to dedicate himself to poetry became a definite resolve on the occasion of his visit to Italy, where the learned academies acclaimed him with eager enthusiasm ; and his determination, reached not without a struggle, to forswear Latin poetry, with its promise of European reputation, in favour of English, "to fix all the art and industry I could unite to the adorning of my native tongue," reminds us irresistibly of the patriotic zeal that had inspired Du Bellay's *Défense* and which Spenser had inherited from his master Mulcaster. Like the Pléiade, he knows that inspiration is not enough, that the poet must devote his "art and industry" and "live laborious days," and more conscientiously than any Renaissance poet he practises what he preaches. Like them he believes that imitation of the great writers of antiquity is the only way to enrich one's own literature ; he draws up a list of Classical authors whom he considers the best models in various *genres*. He also shared that obsession with the "heroic

poem " which had tormented the age of Ronsard as it was to torment that of Dryden, and which produced so many still-born epics ; fortunately, he was the one in a thousand whose powers were not unequal to his ambition.

It would be otiose to measure *Paradise Lost* by the Renaissance canon, an outworn criterion ; for us, its significance lies elsewhere. The point of interest is this : Milton's whole achievement is a magnificent realisation of that ideal after which the Renaissance had blindly groped ; a Classicism complete and vital, reviving some of the essential qualities of the literature of antiquity, and serving moreover as a perfect illustration for those critics who are even now seeking a definition of Classical art.

The clue to Milton's mind and character and art is strength, engendering and combined with restraint. From *Comus* to *Samson* it is the virtue which he loves to portray and praise—energy, self-reliant, self-controlling. And this virtue, Classical in the deepest sense, makes itself felt throughout his work ; his immense power is always disciplined. Hence the structural solidity and dignity of his great poems ; hence, too, his command over language. With the Elizabethans, Classicism had been largely a matter of vague theory ; all their real poetic qualities, their imaginative vigour, the richness and colour and melody of their diction, had been freely squandered. In France Ronsard, as we have seen, attempted more successfully on a small scale to exert Classical restraint over his

material. Milton had at his disposal as copious a store as any Elizabethan except Shakespeare, but he submitted it to the relentless control of his judgment ; an "artificer" on the grand scale, nature abetting. His Classicism is very different from that of Jonson and Malherbe with their preference for "plain and customary language," and from the ascetic purity of Racine ; he creates his own poetic diction, not by rejecting but by selecting. Archaisms, latinisms, technical terms, proper names, all enter in. - He knows that beautiful words lose none of their glamour for being used deliberately, and never were words so cunningly chosen and set in value.¹ For his style, as well as his diction, is highly artificial, intricate with rhetorical devices ; and the extreme elaboration of his rhythms adds to the complex effect of the whole.

Milton's prosody is, like his style, an inexhaustible fund of subtle inventions. In his early poems he showed his mastery over rhymed forms—the sonnet, the sequence of octosyllabic couplets, the stanzas of the *Ode on the Nativity*, and the experiments in varying metre of *Lycidas*, *Time*, *Upon the Circumcision*, *At a solemn music*. (In these he carries on the tradition of strophic architecture of Spenser's *Epithalamion* ; similar work, in France, had been done by Ronsard and partly undone by Malherbe.) Later he condemned rhyme with the bitter words, "the

¹ Cf. Ronsard, *Préface de la Franciade* : "Les paroles plus rehaussées et recherchées, bien assises en leur lieu par art et non à la volée."

invention of a barbarous age to set off wretched matter and lame metre"; considering which ingratitude, Dryden's strictures on his *Juvenilia*—"the rhyme is always constrained and forced, and comes hardly from him"—only deal justice! But in the same breath Milton describes his new ideal: "true musical delight . . . consists only in apt numbers, fit quantity of syllables, and the sense variously drawn out from one verse into another," which but faintly suggests the resources of his harmony and his counterpoint.

For *Paradise Lost* he had to fashion his own medium. Prosody, save in the lyric, had come to a desperate pass; the dramatic blank verse and the "enjambéd" couplets of Caroline poets were slipshod and shapeless. Two ways of reform lay open; Milton abandoned rhyme and subjected blank verse to the strictest æsthetic discipline. But his method found no follower for long years, and the next generation, seeking an easier solution, adopted the "closed couplet" of Waller and Denham. Their choice is significant, providing a clue to the new conception of poetry which comes in with them, and to the study of which we must now turn.

CHAPTER III

THE AUGUSTAN AGE

“The great wit’s great work is to refuse.”
—*Sir John Berkenhead.*

DURING the latter half of the seventeenth century and a large part of the eighteenth, there reigns both in France and in England an artistic ideal that is singularly clear, emphatic and universal. The lively Muse of the English Renaissance is finally subdued to the more sober mien that Malherbe had already taught her neighbour to wear ; the “rules of duty” to which she bows are those enforced by foreign legislators. Boileau, in his *Art Poétique*, formulated the principles that guided all the great writers of his race and time ; England adopted them, not from any spirit of subservience, but because they exactly answered the needs of the new generation.

This period is known in France as “l’époque classique” ; but I have hesitated to restrict the notion of Classicism to any particular age or group, and have generally preferred the term Augustan ; familiar to us as a description of the school of Pope, this may be extended to the generation of Boileau and of Dryden, and it holds throughout the eighteenth century until the final triumph of Romanticism.

Poetry with the Augustans is a self-conscious

and highly organised business. The art has become a matter of public interest, and its whole character changes, a social, *mondain* ideal replacing the individualism of the past. The clue to the Augustans' conception of poetry lies in their strong sense of the unity and continuity of human nature.

As science revealed to them an ordered universe, they liked to trace in the microcosm Man a similar order and harmony, to deduce the general from the particular and to see beneath the accidents of time and space and circumstance one permanent substance, governed by unchanging laws: Man, the norm, the common denominator among men. So generalised, Man is likely to become an abstraction; and the age is much concerned with abstract discussion of human nature, especially in France, the race being inclined that way. And if we owe to this tendency, on the one hand, the searching insight of a La Rochefoucauld, the acute observation of a La Bruyère, we find, on the other, much sententious moralising, vague and secondhand and therefore false, making us cry with Blake: "To generalise is to be an idiot . . . Labour well the Minute Particulars!"

The "Classical" dramatist creates his characters according to this principle of generalisation. To "follow nature" is, for him, to imitate (in Aristotelian sense) this common, central core. The tragedies of Racine deal with passion quintessential, out of space and time; underlying Molière's topical satire is a

broad treatment of the eternal "types" of human vice and folly. These masters give new life and value to the old accepted truths ; they show us, in concentrated and durable form, the familiar fundamental instincts and emotions of mankind. We may, possibly, prefer the psychologist who probes the obscurer crannies of the soul and lingers over idiosyncrasies, or who, building his peculiar scale of values, can create characters that are convincing though exceptional ; this is the *psychologie de découverte* which, for André Gide at least, has greater interest than the *psychologie de reconnaissance*. The Classical writer shuns the abnormal, the particular ; his strength is thereby put all the more keenly to the test, since he must give his generalities a really universal significance. Obvious pitfalls await him ; too often the conventional view of human nature does duty for the real thing ; Molière's imitators, lacking his powers of characterisation, embodied the ruling passions in cardboard dummies, not in living men ; while the *reductio ad absurdum* of the cult for types is Rymer's protest that Iago does not conform to the character of a soldier as prescribed by the decorum of tradition, which he identifies with nature.¹

The same doctrine lies behind the Classical conception of originality in thought and expression. "Qu'est-ce qu'une pensée neuve, brillante,

¹ Wordsworth was to incur a similar reproach from Jeffrey, a die-hard Classicist, for his unconventional delineation of the village schoolmaster.

extraordinaire ? ” asked Boileau. “ C’est une pensée qui a dû venir à tout le monde et que quelqu’un s’avise le premier d’exprimer.” Pope goes even farther in support of the commonplace when he defines true wit as “ what oft was thought but ne’er so well expressed.” La Bruyère felt the same way : “ Tout est dit, et l’on vient trop tard depuis plus de sept mille ans qu’il y a des hommes, et qui pensent,” and he devoted himself to expressing in his own way, “ comme mien,” the thoughts which he shared with the rest of humanity.

Originality in thought is deprecated ; anything that deviates from the common opinion is “unnatural” and false ; but a familiar idea takes on new life when clothed in a fresh and striking form. We to-day, eclectics tinged with romanticism, can appreciate thought and form, even bizarre and perverse, as an expression of individuality ; but to the Classicist, form is valueless unless founded on the solid basis of a “ true thought,” in which case it cannot be too highly polished.

And if the value of a thought or feeling depends upon its universality, the only criterion by which to judge that value is the consensus of public opinion. Boileau bows to the verdict of “ le gros des hommes,” which “ à la longue ne se trompe point sur les ouvrages d’esprit.” We have moved a long way from the arrogant exclusiveness of the *Pléiade* !

It is a remarkable fact, moreover, that the only poetic *genres* which flourish in the Augustan

period are those which depend on the support of a large public: the drama, the satire, the didactic and the argumentative poem. The poet has become a publicist; his work must appeal to the common reader, must undergo discussion in *salon*, coffee-house and clubroom. He will therefore plane and polish it, restrain and generalise his feelings, aim at objectivity; he will not be averse to rhetoric, which the public finds hard to distinguish from poetry. He will conform to certain accepted standards of language and rules of versification, for the public must not be disconcerted by eccentricity.

And since the strong social sense of the Augustans involves a sense of social duty, the old belief in the didactic aim of poetry is retained.

"Qu'en savantes leçons votre muse fertile
Partout joigne au plaisant le solide et l'utile,"

said Boileau. Dryden, in his preface to *Troilus*, allowed that "to instruct delightfully is the general end of all poetry," though elsewhere, a heretic, he declares delight to be "the chief, if not the only, end of poetry." And for Pope, "no writing is good that does not tend to better mankind in some way or other." In what way, fortunately, remains unspecified; and deliberate didacticism is not the constant practice of the Augustans.

Hand in hand with this article of the Renaissance creed went the belief in the poet's "virtue" and encyclopedic learning. We have seen it expressed by Ronsard, by Milton; and it is

repeated by the Augustans, although with a somewhat changed significance. The lofty ideal, the fervour of the Renaissance have faded; a more accessible standard is set up—the *honnête homme*, the decent and agreeable member of polite society:

“Tho’ learn’d, well-bred : and tho’ well-bred, sincere.”

Pope, Boileau, Addison all agree in defining this ideal, so characteristic of their age.

There is another, and a most important, feature of the Augustan attitude to poetry: its rationalism, which, though due to other causes than the growth of the social sense, is yet closely connected with it. For how is the poet to control his invention, to ensure the general and permanent appeal of his work? how shall the public gauge the “truth” of his conception? Creator and critic both must submit to the rule of reason, of good sense. “Le bon sens est la chose du monde la mieux partagée,” had said Descartes, who was really responsible for establishing its prerogative to judge of all things. It is the one safe touchstone, the link between men; it is the public’s safeguard and should be the author’s guide. One is puzzled at first by the close relation, almost identity, established between Nature, Reason and Truth, by Augustan theorists. Nature is the established order of things, both in the universe and in man; Reason is the faculty which discerns that order, and which, in the realm of literature, decides whether an author’s conception conforms to it. And Truth

is the attribute of poetry which passes this test ; not only is individual fancy condemned, but mere outward realism will not serve, nor the reporting of actual events, which may be exceptions to the general rule. Truth is rather " le vraisemblable," logical probability ; according to Aristotle, poetry is a more philosophical thing than history. And Dryden marks the difference between external and internal truth : " Poetry must resemble natural truth but it must *be* ethical . . . the soul is but half satisfied when there is not truth in the foundation."

Verisimilitude being the criterion, all the imaginative romances of the earlier age, and Elizabethan tragedies with their wildly improbable plots, stand condemned. Certain Renaissance theorists, including Ronsard, had already stressed this essentially Classical doctrine. But in England even Sidney, the most Classical of our Elizabethan critics, had freely indulged, in the *Arcadia*, his native passion for romantic extravagance. Now, however, the axe falls relentlessly, in England as well as in France ; Rymer can disparage the *Faerie Queene* : " All is fanciful and chimerical, without any uniformity, without any foundation in truth ; his poem is perfect fairyland." (The humanist tradition, it must be noted, made exception for the myths of antiquity ; Boileau allows *le merveilleux* in the Epic, provided an allegorical interpretation be always understood.)

The appeal to Reason or Good Sense is the watchword of the Augustan critic. The compatriots of Descartes readily responded to Boileau's

reiterated "Aimez donc la raison," his "Tout doit tendre au bon sens." In England, Hobbes had prepared the way by decrying Imagination as "nothing else but sense decaying, or weakened by the absence of the object," thus reducing it, as Mr. Van Doren¹ remarks, to "a mechanical device for reproducing experience as such"; and by declaring Fancy, like her "severer sister" Judgment, to be only the result of wide experience and a good memory. This sounded the death-knell of Romanticism for the time being; England was therefore ripe to accept the teaching of the Rationalists, and welcomed a criterion which brought the ticklish business of literary criticism within the reach of the plain man. *The Rehearsal* in 1671 ridicules the heroic drama of its day by application of the new touchstone; Rymer in 1674 treats Shakespeare and Fletcher as *The Rehearsal* had treated Dryden; while the aristocratic critics of the end of the century—Mulgrave, Roscommon, Granville—join in the chorus in praise of Reason. The term, however, remains too vaguely defined; while, in theory, it denotes that lofty intellectual power that contemplates the order of the universe, in practice it becomes too often the carping criticism of insensitive Philistines. Its strength and weakness in the judgment of literature are shown in Dr. Johnson, who with his sanity and deep human wisdom often cuts straight to the heart of the matter, and who yet remains blind to the more subtle and imaginative parts of poetry.

¹ M. Van Doren, *The Poetry of John Dryden* (1920).

Rationalism did not at first sterilise French poetry, as it was to do in the eighteenth century ; and the saving influence was that sense of beauty fostered by the study of Classical literature. We see Boileau himself fighting for beauty, as represented by the Classics, against a group of Rationalists—Perrault and his allies—who protested in the name of common sense against the authority of “ the Ancients,” which threatened, they thought, to become a tyranny. Boileau’s position was a paradoxical one ; though a leader of the modern school, he must appear to disparage the art of his contemporaries. But he achieved a compromise in his conciliatory letter to Perrault, which closed the first instalment of the “ *Querelle* ” ; what prevents one, he asked, from enjoying both the literature of antiquity and that of one’s own day ? an attitude shared by Dryden and summed up by Pope, with his admirable finality :

“ Regard not then if Wit be old or new,
But blame the false, and value still the true.”

It was the only reasonable course ; and Boileau was justified in appealing not only to taste, but to good sense, in support of his view—in using their own argument against the Rationalists. For after all, reverence for antiquity was not, as they supposed, incompatible with Reason ; and it found full support in the current doctrine about Nature. Since man in essentials has not changed since the beginning, the appeal of Classical works is still fresh (a point made by La Bruyère in his *Discours sur Théophraste*), and

their merit is vouched for by the unvarying admiration of readers throughout the ages. "L'antiquité d'un écrivain n'est pas un titre certain de son mérite ; mais l'antique et constante admiration qu'on a toujours eue pour ses ouvrages est une preuve sûre et infaillible qu'on les doit admirer" (Boileau, *Réflexions sur Longin*). Against this universal testimony the "Modernes" have the temerity to oppose their own warped judgment : "Veut-il (Perrault) persuader à tous les hommes que depuis deux mille ans ils n'ont pas eu le sens commun ? Cela fait pitié."

Good sense, however, was hardly adequate, except to the more coarse-fibred Augustans such as Rymer, to do the whole duty of æsthetic appreciation ; and another faculty is made responsible for its finer shades, Taste, *le bon goût*. This term is freely used by Augustan critics ; but they are not at one as to its meaning. Rebels, such as Méré and Saint-Évremond, and Temple in England, use it to justify their individual, impressionistic judgments in literature ; but with the majority of Augustans it implies something more closely related to their cherished "good sense"—a faculty less intellectual, more intangible and mysterious, but equally universal and permanent. La Bruyère states this emphatically : "Il y a dans l'art un point de perfection, comme de bonté ou de maturité dans la nature. Celui qui le sent et qui l'aime a le goût parfait ; celui qui ne le sent pas, et qui aime en deçà ou au delà, a le goût défectueux. Il y a donc un bon et un mauvais goût, et l'on dispute des goûts avec

fondement" (*Des Ouvrages de l'Esprit*). This belief in a fixed standard of taste was necessary as a foundation for the dogmatic pronouncements of the Augustans. And Taste, in this sense, comes to the succour of Reason in discerning the merits of contemporary works and in awarding the prize to those of Antiquity.

But the cult of the Classics, sound in itself and largely beneficial to those poets who knew how to profit by it, produced in criticism one result of doubtful advantage. The reproach most often levelled at the Augustan ideal, both by independent spirits at the time and by Romantic critics later, was its subservience to "the rules." But in this business of the rules we must distinguish; the Augustans were none too clear themselves. Some tried once more to demonstrate the identity of the Classical tradition, or of this offshoot of it, with the laws of good sense. The rules, said Pope, were "nature methodised" (echoing Rapin, "La nature mise en méthode et le bon sens réduit en principes"). They are the equivalent, in art, of the conventions of society: not inviolable laws, but short cuts to the best result, based on the experience and practice of the great writers of old, who had themselves reached them by the guiding light of Reason. The danger was, of course, that the rules should be considered as all-sufficing; dull pedants—d'Aubignac, Le Bossu, Dacier—catalogued them; heretics like Saint-Évremond, flying to the other extreme, rejected them entirely; but the majority of good writers hesitated, realising their utility and yet

their empirical nature. "La grande règle de toutes les règles n'est-elle pas de plaire ?" cried Molière, making audacious fun of them in his *Critique de l'École des Femmes* ; à propos of which Rapin protested that when Molière pleased it was by virtue of the rules ! Dryden, who could declare that "Spenser wanted only to have read Le Bossu," is characteristically vacillating in his allegiance ; as Neander in the *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, he had poured scorn on the "regular French play," with its "servile observations" of the rules.

But no sensible Augustan—not Boileau, nor Pope, nor even Rapin in his more intelligent moments—ever considered adherence to the rules as a substitute for genius. Genuine literary taste, as well as the critical theory of ages, taught them that inspiration was the one rare and essential thing. It was his disgust with the regular and tedious epics of his contemporaries that provoked some of Boileau's keenest satire ; for above all things he, like Pope, detested dullness and insipidity, preferring an occasional daring irregularity to "un style trop égal et toujours uniforme" ; while in the drama "le secret est d'abord de plaire et de toucher." And his study of Longinus, that "ardent judge," taught him that the true critic must respond to the beauties that "no precept can declare," to the bolder flights of the poetic imagination.

In England, Dryden had already given a shining example of this positive sort of criticism, and shown it to be not uncongenial to the national temper. The influence of Longinus spread

rapidly, largely thanks to Boileau's translation ; and Pope, not only in the *Essay* but in all his criticism shows a remarkable power of appreciating poetry of a type most alien to his own. Like Boileau he tries to steer clear of the extremes of rationalism and rule-worship, knowing that—

“ Great wits may sometimes gloriously offend,
And rise to faults true critics dare not mend.”

He hesitates, however, to extend to writers of his own day the licence enjoyed by antiquity. “ Moderns, beware ! ” The cry has been heard so often since Pope's time that it arouses in us only irritation against such narrow-minded timidity ; yet his counsel of prudence was, perhaps, the wisest. For the worst faults of the Augustans were due not to the limits imposed by their creed, but to their infringement of those limits. In criticism they keep their heads ; Reason and Taste and reverence for antiquity can run in harness ; in their practice we can almost draw a sharp dividing-line between the poetry which conforms to their principles, and is successful, and that which strains after effects not natural to their genius, and is false and pretentious.

The distinction will be made clearer if we examine the artistic ideal which, in their wiser moods, they kept before them.

Restraint and economy, with order, are the essential lessons learnt by the Augustans from the Classics ; so that Art, given genius, is a matter of organisation and omission : “ The great wit's great work is to refuse.” They hate the waste

ful diffuseness of sixteenth-century poems ; a neat, close, symmetrical structure results from the disciplining of lavish "invention." In expression, the ideal is "propriety" : thought and phrase in harmony with the theme and with the whole poem—Dryden defines Wit as "thoughts and words elegantly adapted to the subject"—and exact adequacy : "Dire tout ce qu'il faut et ne dire que ce qu'il faut," is Boileau's advice. The extreme limits of economy are reached by Racine ; the disproportion between the fiery passion he has to portray and the narrow vocabulary at his disposal results in an effect of constant understatement ; he excels at rendering a tense and complex situation in a few commonplace words. He was not alone in his gift for compression ; the epigrammatic brilliance of Pope, Dryden and La Rochefoucauld is a lasting tribute to the virtues of restraint and economy. The commoner ideal both in France and in England is not, however, the *liotes* of Racine, but rather the exact fitting of phrase to thought, and some of the happiest achievements of the Augustans are in this line ; we shall not quarrel with them if the limits imposed by rationalism on the thought to be expressed inevitably affect the manner of expression, and if their poetry is lacking in overtones and suggestion. On grounds both of good sense and of good taste, which here become identified, their creed forbids all excess, in expression as well as in thought ; it condemns the bombast of the Elizabethans, the conceits of Précieux and

metaphysicals : incorrectness in style, metaphor or grammar : and any sort of obscurity—

“ Si le sens de vos vers tarde à se faire entendre,
Mon esprit aussitôt commence à se détendre.”

(Boileau's impatience is an extreme case ; the English Augustans, poring over Shakespeare, did not give up so easily.) In versification they seek smoothness with sonority, regularity without monotony, an ideal modestly summed up by Pope as “correctness,” and not so easily attained as those versifiers thought who lacked his or Racine's exquisite sensitiveness.

These, then, are the principles which, variously applied, underlie the successful achievements of Augustan poetry ; the poetry of sober and judicious minds, of scrupulous and careful artists. Meanwhile, however, certain doctrines of the Renaissance creed, formulated originally in view of poetry of a very different sort, the splendid imaginative literature of Greece, lingered on and were awkwardly accommodated by the Augustans to their commonsense view : the belief in “poetic fury,” and the cult for the “heroic poem” with its ornate and elevated diction. To reinforce these came Longinus, whose influence, invaluable in criticism, was dangerous to the poets of the age ; with infectious ardour, he had described the enthusiasm and audacity which mark the highest poetry. And when the staid Augustans, deliberately abandoning their natural sobriety, simulated inspired frenzy, their antics were more ludicrous

than impressive. Boileau's defence of the *nobles hardiesses* of Pindar, and his own odes, as bad as Ronsard's Pindarics, are significant as symptoms of the same delusion rather than as tokens of critical tolerance. For Pindar, just because no one understood him, was the traditional "type" of poetic licence; and perverse extravagance was an accepted feature of the ode.

"Son style impétueux souvent marche au hasard ;
Chez elle un beau désordre est un effet de l'art."

The form which this artificial fervour took with Dryden must be considered presently.

And the conventional "poetic diction" of the school, which earned it such abuse from the Romantics of both countries, has a like origin: the attempt to do something uncongenial. Writers who have learnt to suppress the natural imaginative instincts of the poet, or in whom, as is more likely, such instincts have never been active, are compelled to ape the results of original imagination when the theme of their verse demands it; and for the Augustans, the coining of a set of conventional expressions allowed the unemotional and the unimaginative to speak of love and nature with glib facility, and excused the lazy from feeling and seeing for themselves. And this counterfeit poetic diction passed as genuine with the public, and so remained long current. When poets aimed at elegance and elevation, "decorum" demanded the use of terms sanctioned by convention as elegant or elevated; where synonyms existed, one was

sure to be more noble than the other and was therefore inevitably used. An excessive squeamishness shrank from the *mot propre* as being vulgar, and from any unexpected, however vivid, expression as being eccentric. Elaborate feats of circumlocution were performed to make an everyday object or action fit into its aristocratic surroundings. Boileau inherited from the despised Pléiade their passion for periphrasis, one of their worst faults ; to express trivial matters "noblement et avec élégance" was, he confessed, his most treasured ambition.

Among other remnants of the Classical stock-in-trade which were handed down, sadly battered, to the Augustans were the use of trite epithets (the *épihètes oiseux* against which Ronsard had vainly protested), of mythological allusions which had lost their freshness, and of personification : "Inoculation, heavenly maid, descend !" But the periphrasis, one of their favourite and most characteristic ornaments, deserves a rather closer consideration.

When its sole excuse is literary prudery, it is entirely ridiculous. Molière's *Précieuses*, calling for armchairs with the choice phrase "Voiturez-nous ici les commodités de la conversation," are in this respect the worthy ancestresses of a whole race of eighteenth-century poetasters and dramatists. But it is often used with intent to convey definite æsthetic pleasure by a display of virtuosity. Such, for instance, was Boileau's aim, and he took his cue

from Virgil and Horace. In this case the performer's skill must be adequate to his ambition, which too seldom happens ; periphrasis becomes so easily an encumbrance rather than a delight. But where it is successful, periphrasis can do more than dazzle by its virtuosity, it can help to suggest the object or action described. In the "little wanton boys that swim on bladders" of *Henry VIII* we have a direct statement; but Gray's circumlocution,

"Who foremost now delight to cleave
With pliant arm thy glassy wave,"

gives us swimming in slow-motion.

The whole problem of this artificial poetic diction, as being a deformation of the genuine language of poetry, calls for close, almost pathological investigation. In sickness as in health, French and English poetry reveal their differences. The tendency of the *style noble* of France is towards excessive abstraction ; Tragedy, with its stilted dignity, its remoteness from ordinary life, did its best to purge from the vocabulary the last vestiges of colour and concreteness, and made ceaseless demands on the ingenuity of its authors in the creation of periphrases. As was suggested in the Introduction, the French make less *natural* distinction between the language of poetry and that of prose, than the English ; similarly, their *artificial* poetic diction consists less in the elaboration of conventional elegances than in the sifting and sterilising of the existing language. The tendency of the Romantic

reform, in each country, is significant : Wordsworth's aim is, above all, to clear away false ornaments, to simplify the language of poetry ; Hugo's is to enrich it.

The problem of poetic diction is further complicated by the way in which words inevitably bring with them a train of irrelevant associations, dependent on the taste and temper of the time, so that the elegances of one age are the vulgarities of the next, and vice versa. Thus, while Dr. Johnson condemns "*dun* night" in *Macbeth* as "an epithet now seldom heard but in the stable," the word has been re-poetised for us by the Romantics, by Shelley for instance :

"When the night is left behind
In the deep east, *dun* and blind,"

and we are far more offended by certain Augustan clichés which banality and parody have made ridiculous.

Boileau's verse shows just what can be done by adherence to the principles of neo-Classicism when genuine poetic inspiration is lacking. A painstaking artist, he envied Molière his fluency ; making "the rhyme fit the reason" was a constant problem, which he turned to good account by making it the theme of his second satire. His versification is irreproachable in the Malherbe tradition ; he shows the adequacy of the alexandrine, scrupulously end-stopped, for coining concise maxims and epigrams ; but he shows also its worst defects, with his constant inversions, his occasional *chevilles*, redundancies,

and above all his monotony, which arises less from the strict regularity of his cæsuras than from the lack of significance in his words themselves.

He is happiest on the lower levels : straightforward didacticism, urbane satire ; his thought is always commonsense and commonplace, true to his teaching ; he has no conceits, no fancies, no subtlety. His satires, which are early, lack point except when "la haine d'un sot livre" stimulates him to epigram ; and even then it is the neat turn of the thought that we admire rather than anything striking in its expression. A comparison with Pope makes this particularly clear. Take, for example, Boileau's protest of independence towards his scribbler-victims :

"Qui méprise Cotin n'estime point son Roi,
Et n'a, selon Cotin, ni Dieu, ni foi, ni loi.
Mais quoi ! répondrez-vous : Cotin nous peut-il nuire ?
Et par ses cris enfin que sauroit-il produire ?
Interdire à mes vers, dont peut-être il fait cas,
L'entrée aux pensions, où je ne prétends pas ?"
(*Satire IX.*)

And contrast Pope, in the *Epistle to Arbuthnot*, with his greater fire and vividness :

"What tho' my name stood rubric on the walls,
Or plaister'd posts, with claps, in capitals ?
Or smoking forth, a hundred hawkers' load,
On wings of winds came flying all abroad ?
I sought no homage from the race that write ;
I kept, like Asian monarchs, from their sight :
Poems I heeded (now be-rhym'd so long)
No more than thou, great George ! a birthday
song . . ."

Boileau's greatest success is in the mock-heroic vein, the *style noble* lending itself admirably to parody ; when, as in his Odes, he uses it seriously, we remember *Le Lutrin* and want to laugh again. For when Boileau flies high he falls, encumbered with his pompous, conventional diction, his empty epithets, his Classical allusions and his periphrases ; in the *Art Poétique* his purple patches stand out disagreeably against the homely texture of his "commonsense" manner.

The narrow and abstract *style noble* finds its only justification in the poetry of Racine. He is the supreme example of an artist hemmed in on every side by seemingly unreasonable barriers, and turning his bondage to good account. The stringency of the dramatic rules does not cramp him, it forces him to tighten and simplify his structure, to fix all interest on the play of passions. In the same way the texture of his verse, cold and thin at a first glance, reveals the more nakedly the intense feeling behind. That fire can transfigure even his conventional elegances ; we forget their artificiality and take them as symbols ; it is only when the emotion cools, as it does at times, that their tinsel nature is apparent. And Racine's characters, at their supreme moments, use the plainest speech, attaining a peculiar greatness : "Ce sublime et ce merveilleux qui se trouvent souvent dans les paroles les plus simples et dont la simplicité fait quelquefois la sublimité," as Boileau had said echoing Longinus. The colourless nature of his language is in har-

mony with the strange rarefied atmosphere of his drama, while his occasional imaginative touches stand out the more vividly by contrast with the subdued tone that prevails. Such is that mysterious cry of Phèdre :

“ Dieu ! que ne suis-je assise à l’ombre des forêts !
Quand pourrai-je, au travers d’une noble poussière,
Suivre de l’œil un char fuyant dans la carrière ? ”

Racine’s submission to the Malherbian prosody does not, as with Boileau, mean monotony ; the delicacy of his variations on the staple rhythm makes them the more significant to an attentive ear. A passage of seven lines from *Bérénice* will reveal, more clearly than the critic’s praise can do, his peculiar qualities of intensity and simplicity, and the modulations of his music ; it is the queen’s last appeal to her lover when she learns that she is to leave him for ever :

“ Pour jamais ! Ah, seigneur, songez-vous en vous-même
Combien ce mot cruel est affreux quand on aime ?
Dans un mois, dans un an, comment souffrirons-nous,
Seigneur, que tant de mers me séparent de vous ?
Que le jour recommence et que le jour finisse
Sans que jamais Titus puisse voir Bérénice,
Sans que de tout le jour je puisse voir Titus ? ”

There is no railing, no ranting, but the commonplace words take on an almost intolerable poignancy : *cruel* has its full force, *affreux* becomes a climax ; the fullness of the emotion carries on the lines with an effect, almost, of *enjambement* : “ comment souffrirons-nous, Seigneur . . . ” : then deliberate regularity, to suggest the wear-

ness of her empty days—but even so, with varied pauses and emphasis, as the full horror dawns upon her, rising to the impetuous rush of the last line.

French Classicism produced one other poet, and sank exhausted with the effort, but that one perfectly sums up the peculiar virtues of the race and the ideal. The Fables of La Fontaine show us what the friend of Boileau can do with an artistic sense as fine as Racine's, a smaller framework and a more pliable material. The *genre* allows him comparative liberty; no one had troubled to lay down rules for the fabulist, and he could "imitate" Antiquity in the true Renaissance sense, assimilating and transforming his material. In versification, too, he is relatively free: free to vary metre and rhyme-scheme to suit the unfolding of his story; and he uses this licence, not as an excuse for carelessness, but as an opportunity for endless subtle dramatic and picturesque effects. His rhythms have an almost conversational suppleness, but they are strictly controlled; he gives an impression of nonchalant ease, but the attitude is calculated in every detail. The Classical discipline is exerted; each tiny poem is perfect in structure, concise and clear in expression, fulfilling all the demands of "propriety" and "correctness," and yet combining with these the rarer qualities of vividness and imagination which we had thought for ever banned by the dictatorship of Malherbe and Boileau. La Fontaine is not confined to the abstract, elegant speech of polite society: moving in fields and woods, his mind is full of the

fresh concrete images of natural things. He need not shrink from the *mot propre* ; his diction is chosen with sensitive discrimination, but from a generous range ; quaint unusual words, technical terms and archaisms give his effects of naïveté and picturesqueness. And the good sense, urbanity and polished wit which stamp him as a man of the world, do not preclude a touch of delicate feeling, almost melancholy at times but always discreet. Wit and feeling, in La Fontaine, are not dissociated but exquisitely co-ordinated.

English critical thought, during the Augustan period, was manifestly influenced by that of France. Our critics acknowledged their obligation and paid due tribute to their masters, yet were moved thereby the more vigorously to assert the independence and superiority of English poetry. "The French are as much better critics than the English as they are worse poets," declares Dryden ; their language is at fault, being "not strung with sinews, like our English : it has the nimbleness of a greyhound, but not the bulk and body of a mastiff," and the genius of their poets is like their tongue, "light and trifling" in comparison with the English. The contrast between the "affected purity" and thinness of French, and the "masculine vigour" of English poetry is proudly pointed out by Dryden's contemporaries. The French alexandrines, says Rymer, "would make up in length for what they want in strength and substance ; yet are they too faint and languishing, and attain not that numerosity which the dignity of heroic verse requires,

and which is ordinary in an English verse of ten syllables." Quoting a diffuse and vapid passage from Chapelain (shades of Boileau !) he comments : " This description is perfect French ; there is scarce any coming at a little sense, 'tis so encompassed about with words," and applauds the greater concentration and expressiveness of English verse. Roscommon echoes the same boast :

"But who did ever in French authors see
The comprehensive English energy ?
The weighty bullion of one sterling line,
Drawn to French wire, would through whole pages
shine."

Fully conscious of the richness of their material, and convinced that their intrinsic poetic powers were no less than those of their predecessors, and their taste and judgment far greater, the English Augustans condescendingly accepted from the French the principles by which to work out their reform. Their accomplishment justified their assumption, though not entirely in the way they imagined ; the splendour of the English language as an instrument for poetic expression (" le caractère de leur langage qui est propre aux grandes expressions," is the tribute of Rapin), and the irrepressible vigour of the English imagination, triumphing in fields hitherto untrodden.

La Fontaine alone of Classical French poets knew how to exploit the resources of his native idiom and of his poetic tradition. The language of Boileau's satires and of Molière's comedies is racy enough, but it is hardly poetry,

and Racine's bare beauty is a miracle not to be repeated ; while the bulk of their contemporaries and successors were frigid versifiers. But Dryden, Pope and their better followers did not reject their heritage, in practice any more than in theory, but assimilated its qualities and made their own peculiar use of it.

Dryden in his criticism oscillates continually between conformity and independence ; in his poetry he attains an admirable stability, yet only after several unsuccessful attempts, and even then he never fully realises where his true genius lies. And his critical theory throws light on his failures even more than on his successes. Believing, like all his generation, that the "heroic poem is the greatest work which the soul of man is capable to perform," and that the heroic drama comes second, as an "imitation in little" of the epic, he tried his hand at the one and dreamt of excelling in the other ; and convinced that "the sublimest subjects ought to be adorned with the sublimest expressions," he strained his language to a false sublimity which is no better than the "abominable fustian" he condemns in Elizabethan writers. The "good sense" which here deserted him found another mouthpiece and spoke up against him ; the taunts of *The Rehearsal* hurt bitterly, and moved him to reply in the *Apology for Heroic Poetry and Poetic License*. In this work he cuts an almost Romantic figure, championing the freedom of the poet's imagination against the attacks of prosaic minds, and appealing to Longinus in his favour ; many of his

sayings have a profound general significance, and it is only when we remember that he is defending his own pompous bombast that the portent lessens. The heightened speech of intense emotion did not come naturally to him, and he feigned it awkwardly : moreover, his was not the type of mind that expresses itself readily in images. He had already, in the *Annus Mirabilis*, that fire-work display of "wit-writing," shown himself ill at these figures ; at that time he had not yet cast off a fondness for conceits, inherited from Cowley, the "darling" of his youth ; to the end the conceits are liable to recur, in panegyrics and epitaphs, and the train of laboured metaphors and similes accompanies the "grand style" in his translation of the *Æneid*.

Mr. Van Doren, in his admirable book, ascribes other defects of Dryden's unnatural manner to the influence of his critical theories. The craze for comparing poetry to eloquence, to painting, to music, led him and many other Augustans to strain after the effects of these other arts. "Instead of deepening its own medium by contact with oratory, painting and music, poetry became shallow ; instead of growing more eloquent, more picturesque and more harmonious, it only grew more rhetorical, more vague and more monotonous." Hence the lofty stiffness of his tone on occasions, such as his translation of Chaucer, when a pliable familiar style is required ; hence the superficial and conventional character of the descriptions, the artificial "imitative harmonies" that deck his Virgil.

But when Dryden forbore to force his genius into ways unsuited to it, no one proves more admirably the scope and power of English poetry within the limits of the Augustan definition. Here his essential sanity takes control ; according to the Romantic view he is too reasonable to be a poet, but Dryden shows that admirable poetry can be conceived "in the wit," and that the soul is not its only source.

His argumentative poems illustrate the Augustan theory of originality in thought and expression. Dryden's thought is never deep, subtle nor individual, but the use he makes of his intellectual material gives it permanence. The Romantic poets, confusing thought and emotion, convey their vague "philosophy" by the suggestive power of beautiful words and images ; Dryden, for whom the chief requirement of the poet was "to argue well," takes over ready-made the substance of his argument—religious controversy, most unpromising of themes—and, by sheer virtuosity, manipulates it into something æsthetically, as well as logically, satisfying. His intellectual power is shown not only in dialectics ; it controls all his great poems, form and substance. It accounts for the structural solidity, the satisfying coherence of his work. In expression, too, the intellectual control is always felt ; for instance, when, abandoning the attempt to be metaphorical at all costs, he uses "imaging" in the way most suited to his genius, choosing his metaphors deliberately, distributing them carefully, working them out coldly and logically.

“Some beams of wit on other souls may fall,
Strike through and make a lucid interval ;
But Shadwell’s genuine night admits no ray,
His rising fogs prevail upon the day. . . .”

(*MacFlecknoe.*)

It is in his satires that the element of “surprise ” is most evident ; but his most amazing strokes of wit and of burlesque are not exuberant ; the energy that created them always knew when to hold back.

His technical power is fully revealed by a study of his versification. He was a master of various metrical forms, witness his lyrics and his dramatic blank verse ; but his chosen instrument was the “heroic couplet.” It was perhaps inevitable that this form should come to the fore when the tendencies of the age had fully declared themselves. It satisfied the demand for uniformity and order, and encouraged neatness and precision of thought and expression ; it was the English equivalent of Boileau’s alexandrines. The origin of the couplet can be traced to Chaucer, but we need not look farther back than the Augustans did. Waller, performing for English poetry one of Malherbe’s offices, had smoothed out any trace of irregularity within the line, but his couplets tended to fluent monotony ; Denham, whose style had greater force and brevity, had shown the value of antithesis and epigram for strengthening the couplet. Dryden, profiting by the example of both precursors, turned the limitations of the form to good account, realising how “that which most regulates the fancy, and gives the judgment

its busiest employment, is like to bring forth the richest and clearest thoughts." Roscommon's phrase, "the comprehensive English energy," aptly describes Dryden's couplet, with its weight, its force, its concentration. And by his use of words and rhythms he prevents the regularity of his metre from becoming monotonous : not only by the occasional triplets and alexandrines which break up the sequence of couplets, but by the changes rung on stress and cæsura within the line, the cunning accentuation of significant words, the contrast between the direct conversational tone and the heavy pregnant polysyllables :

"To head the faction while their zeal was hot,
And popularly prosecute the plot. . . ."

(Absalom and Achitophel.)

Despite all his striving after harmony and "correctness," his music is rarely delightful in itself ; but it satisfies us in another way, as the appropriate and essential accompaniment to the meaning.

The difference between Dryden's poetry and that of Pope is largely a result of temperament, for they worked on the same principles and in the same field. Pope is, as Mr. Eliot has said, a master of miniature, requiring the smallest canvas ; the tendency to refine and concentrate is, with him, carried to an extreme. Thus he rejects all Dryden's metrical forms save the couplet ; rejects the licences Dryden had taken with the couplet ; seeks to attain, within the couplet, to a more perfect "correctness" than

any of his forbears, and is forced therefore to elaborate a more subtle system of variety in order to avoid monotony. Dryden's verse can give the illusion of an impetuous rush : it is powerful, reverberating ; the rhythms of Pope, more delicately modulated, must be listened to with sensitive attention. But the couplet's narrow cell serves the same purpose, intensifying, by compressing, the poet's utterance ; commonplace thoughts are stamped with that finality which comes from absolute adequacy, combined with the maximum conciseness, of expression ; antithesis sharpens still further the envenomed arrows of wit ; and in the great satiric passages, this perfect control of form only enhances the terrifying effect of his shrill fury.

Pope has his failures too ; he relies too much on the poetic clichés of his day to carry him through passages where original feeling and observation are required. Homer is transformed and travestied by his eighteenth-century elegances ; Eloisa raves to Abelard in the set terms of melodramatic passion ; and even in the *Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady*, which contains some of Pope's most impressive passages, we are held up by "ruby lips," "love-darting eyes" that roll, "that breast that warm'd the world before," and so on. The *Rape* makes exquisite inverted use of the conventional graces, the hyperboles and the periphrases, by applying them to the most trivial of themes, and by creating with them an atmosphere of deliberate artificiality.

But in his satires, the essential poetic faculties

of vivid imagination and sensuous concreteness are made to serve an unwonted purpose, virulent abuse ; it needed scorn and hatred, the strongest passions that he ever felt, to urge him to the heights of extraordinary expression. The phrase is here filled to bursting-point : the ideal of "exactness" is surpassed. All the resources of rhetoric are called upon to vilify the foe : startling metaphors, pointed antitheses ; all the effects of alliteration and sound-suggestion. Exaggeration heralds deliberate anti-climax, the abstract and the concrete jostle, the sublime acts as foil to the grotesque. And the wit that fuses all these heterogeneous elements is of the same quality and intensity, if not of the same nature, as poetic imagination. It is a relief, after the almost intolerable stimulus and strain of the sparkling virulence of the *Dunciad*, to turn to Pope in his quieter mood—to Pope the true Augustan—as he speaks in such a passage as this from the *Characters of Women*, where the peculiar fever of our own generation is diagnosed in the portrait of "Flavia, a wit" : where irony is infinitely wise and almost compassionate, and antithesis and epigram serve no merely rhetorical purpose, but reveal psychological acuity :

"Wise wretch ! with pleasures too refin'd to please ;
With too much spirit to be e'er at ease ;
With too much quickness ever to be taught ;
With too much thinking to have common thought :
You purchase pain with all that joy can give,
And die of nothing but a rage to live."

CHAPTER IV

THE ROMANTIC MOVEMENT

“What the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth.”

—*Keats.*

THE eighteenth century sees the undermining of the Augustan conception of poetry by powerful currents of thought and feeling, which are only to find a full outlet at the Romantic movement. The tyranny of dogma and authority are shaken by scepticism and by the growing sense of the relativity of taste. The narrow scope of man's interests is enlarged; he is not only one of a crowd, nor his world limited by streets and walls; once more he awakes to the beauty of the living universe that lies about him. England leads the way in this evolution, influencing France, and achieving half-successes in the realm of poetry while her neighbour knows only vague and jealous aspirations. James Thomson and many a minor writer of the time show powers of direct observation and spontaneous reaction to the beauties of nature.

Meanwhile the heart, rebelling against the rule of reason, desperately asserts its rights; emotion, cultivated for its own sake, becomes self-conscious, and there is often something factitious and exaggerated about the “sensitivity” of the eighteenth century. The ready flow of tears, whether for joy or sorrow, is held a sign of grace, and when no outward cause

provokes them self-pity and self-love offer sufficient stimulus. Imagination, too, is released, to seek satisfaction in the remotest realms; the Middle Ages are discovered, through their art and poetry, folk-lore and ballads, the sagas of the barbaric North translated—the forgeries of Macpherson and Chatterton mark the climax, but not the end, of this fashion for the Gothic. The word Romantic becomes significantly fashionable, and is applied to all that is wild and terrifying, mysterious and melancholy. Ruins and tombs are visited by moonlight; gardens run riot. The existing ideal of poetry is felt to be inadequate, and dissatisfaction becomes vocal. In England, Warton condemns Pope and Boileau as “lacking in the sublime and the pathetic . . . the two chief nerves of all genuine poesy,” and Hurd justifies the “Gothic Romance” in the face of neo-Classical contempt, protesting that while gaining “a great deal of good sense,” we have lost “a world of fine fabling, the illusion of which is so grateful to the charmed spirit that, in spite of philosophy and fashion, ‘Fairy’ Spenser still ranks highest among the poets,” while Sterne snaps his fingers at the “hyper-critic” and his stop-watch, symbol of regularity and order, “abjuring and detesting the jurisdiction of all other pendulums whatever.”

The verse of Gray and Collins corresponds to this tentative, transitional Romanticism. They follow individual impulse in their metrical experiments; they express personal emotion, though still discreetly veiled and generalised. One turns

to Norse romance for inspiration, the other to the legends of the Highlands ; both are exquisitely sensitive to nature. Gray's *Elegy* is the most perfect expression of that brooding melancholy which, in contrast to the placid optimism of the Augustans, pervades mid-eighteenth-century poetry, and which the noisy declamations of Young and his tribe were to exaggerate and vulgarise. The language of both poets is curiously compounded of fresh and lovely expressions reflecting the influence of Milton's *Juvenilia*, and of the conventional phrases and periphrases. Collins had perhaps the purer diction ; it was the misfortune of Gray to be ridiculed by Dr. Johnson in his own day and by Wordsworth afterwards, for the vagueness and inflation of his imagery.

As the rule of Classicism was more potent and more surely fixed in France, and the essential poetic vigour more deficient, it needed English influence to bring about the literary revolution. Voltaire had revealed our literature to his countrymen, introducing notes on Shakespeare into his *Lettres Philosophiques* to give an added spice to his eulogy of English liberty. The rebellious individualism, the sensibility and romantic imagination which were stirring already in eighteenth-century France were stimulated by contact with the more powerful expression, in contemporary English literature, of the same tendencies. Then came Rousseau, perplexing and tragic figure, in whom egotism and unbridled emotion were carried to the point of mania ; his influence was immense, because he had the

courage and the misfortune to live intensely those experiences of which other men had impotently dreamed. And with Rousseau's eloquence ringing in their ears, with his infectious passion in their blood, the French were all the more eager to absorb the same influences when they came from overseas—from England, "pays de passions et de catastrophes." Richardson, the master of sensibility, Young, Gray, all the melancholy meditators among tombs, and above all the nebulous rhetoric of "Ossian," were translated and read with rapture. Germany had caught the infection, and contributed her quota of influence; Goethe, in *Werther*, created a Romantic hero after Rousseau's own heart, and the pages of French fiction were soon peopled with his brethren; while Madame de Staël was to base her apologia for the Romantic spirit largely upon the study of German literature.

As in England, Boileau and his teaching were reviled, imagination and passion were exalted as the means by which rebels against convention hoped to attain an easy sublimity. "Un génie éclairé de lumières profondes" has no need of art, cries Séran de la Tour in 1762; "règles, préceptes, coutumes . . . rien ne ralentit la rapidité de sa course qui, du premier essor, tend au sublime." And Diderot expresses the desire of his generation for a mysterious and overwhelming stimulus: "La poésie veut quelque chose d'énorme, de barbare et de sauvage . . . La clarté . . . nuit à l'enthousiasme . . . Poètes, parlez sans cesse d'infini, d'éternité, d'immensité . . . Soyez ténébreux."

Yet nothing was achieved in poetry as yet ; the exquisite verse of Chénier, which alone relieves this barren period, is rather the belated flower of the best Classical tradition and stands apart. The true poetry of eighteenth-century Romanticism is found only in the prose of Rousseau and of Chateaubriand. The latter, indeed, is far more than a pioneer ; he is the father of the French Romantic poets, and a greater poet than any of his children. All the separate elements of Romanticism—melancholy and reverie, passion and introspection, the love of nature in its wild and exotic aspects—are fused by the fire of his imaginative impulse, and clothed in the enchanting rhythms and harmonies of his poetic prose.

Thus, by innumerable channels, influences filtered in, and the spiritual atmosphere was subtly and irrevocably altered ; so that when time was ripe and the champions arose, they found things ready for them.

The focus shifts, with the Romantics, from man as a member of society to man as an isolated individual. Rousseau had shown the way when he defied his *moi* and anathematised society. The Romantic poets have to be considered as individuals, each striving towards fullest self-expression, cherishing and not suppressing his idiosyncrasies ; hence the difficulty of extracting from their practice any common principles. The poet obeys no laws but those of his own inspiration ; no rules shall bind him, no Authority awe him, nor Custom nor the example of Antiquity. "This above all : to thine own self be true."

By this means the fields of subject-matter in poetry are enlarged to infinity. There are to be no more distinctions of *genre*, no prejudice about "subjects proper for poetry"; the reactions of the individual to the universe are unlimited, and any of them may be turned into poetry. And the reader of poetry must clear his mind of cant, and judge each work solely on its own intrinsic merits: "L'ouvrage est-il bon ou est-il mauvais: voilà tout le domaine de la critique," said Hugo.

The theory of nature, that foundation of the Classicist doctrine, is challenged and overthrown. Why should the "truth" of the poet's conception depend upon its being familiar to the bulk of mankind? may not the creations of the individual imagination be as valuable and as true? "One central form being granted, it does not follow that all other forms are deformity," cried Blake. "All forms are perfect in the poet's mind . . . they are from imagination." Now for the first time that faculty, the essential one in poetry, is duly stressed and understood. Augustan critics had decried it, Augustan poets shunned it as a will-of-the-wisp leading away from truth as revealed by reason. The Romantics vindicate Imagination as opposed to a narrow "imitation"; they interpret *mimesis* in a subtler way; the mind is not a mirror reflecting the truth of the universe—rather, it creates,

"transcending these,
Far other worlds and other seas"—

it makes its own universe, according to its own

laws, from the materials life offers. Coleridge, the profoundest critic of the age, directed his most searching analysis upon "that synthetical and magical power" Imagination, distinguishing it from the more superficial faculty, Fancy :

"This power, first put into action by the will and understanding, and retained under their irremissive, though gentle and unnoticed, control, reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities : of sameness, with difference ; of the general with the concrete ; the idea with the image ; the individual with the representative ; the sense of novelty and freshness with old and familiar objects ; a more than usual state of emotion with more than usual order ; judgment ever awake and steady self-possession with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement. . . ."

(Beside this view of the creative process, with all the faculties harmoniously co-ordinating, how false and shallow seems the old picture of the poet first blindly accepting inspiration and then in the cold light of reason revising his effusion ; "write with fury but correct with phlegm." Reason, as an intellectual faculty separate from the rest of the mind's activities, has nothing to do with poetry. It is not to judge of the truth of a conception reached by the director method of Imagination, nor to interfere between that conception and its expression in words.

But Coleridge's definition applies, as he is careful to tell us, to "the poet described in ideal perfection" ; and the tendency of the Romantics

is undoubtedly to stress certain aspects of creation to the detriment of others—the “more than usual state of emotion,” the “enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement” are to them the essential in poetry, and they neglect the complementary “more than usual order, judgment ever awake and steady self-possession.” They mistrust restraint, seeing in it only an excuse for debility, or, at best, for self-mutilation ; “exuberance is beauty,” said Blake, “the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom.” Intensity of experience is valued for its own sake ; and this is the key to the Romantic view of life as well as to Romantic art. And whatever the existing fashion in poetry, Romantics will still be found, seeking wisdom along the dangerous road ; and indeed it is only the man “described in ideal perfection” who can learn to regulate and harmonise his emotions without sacrificing one jot of their intensity.

The qualities and defects common to all Romantic poetry are the natural result of this freedom and indiscipline. Imagination, rejoicing as a giant, races unhindered through the world, discovering beauty in things hitherto disdained or dreaded, revelling with unparalleled intensity in beauty wherever found. Not since the Renaissance had such a rapturous response been made to the loveliness of the universe ; its terror, too, for the Romantic imagination loves to seek out the remote, the marvellous, finding excess of wonder and of fear as “poetic” as excess of delight.

The world created by the imagination differs

from the world we know, by this quality of intensity and rarity in all its elements ; and sometimes it serves the poet and the reader as a refuge from the squalor of life ; but with the greater poets it interprets life anew, beautifying without betraying it.

The poet's freedom naturally extends to the form in which his imaginative experience is cast. The narrower conventions of versification and of diction are abolished, and the only difficulties acknowledged, in theory, are those inherent in the act of expression. Yet the Romantics did not pursue their liberty to its logical conclusion, anarchy, as some of their successors have done ; they clung to the traditions of their country's poetry in so far as these are natural and fundamental, and not arbitrary. Wordsworth mistakenly argued that there is no essential difference between the language of poetry and that of prose, and that metre is a "superadded" ornament, but the profounder analysis of Coleridge refutes his error, and the best practice of Romantic poets proves Coleridge right ; the regular pulse, the recurrent harmony of metre, as well as the heightened and selected style and diction, inseparable from one another, are the inevitable result of that "interpenetration of passion and will, of spontaneous impulse and of voluntary purpose," which characterise poetic composition.

Once more, however, the Romantic interpretation of Coleridge's definition tends to be one-sided ; spontaneity of impulse is valued above voluntary purpose ; with undue terror, poets

shun Judgment, that revered arbiter of the Augustans, lest its intrusion should mar the freshness of their conception and of its expression. The very texture of Romantic verse suffers from this contempt for craftsmanship ; above all, the Classical principle of "disposition" is often fatally lacking. We are not surprised if study and imitation go to the winds, since "knowledge of ideal beauty," in Blake's phrase, "is not to be acquired, it is born in us" ; yet the fundamental discipline exerted by the poet on his own imagining, that sense of structure and proportion which enhances the beauty of a work and makes it appeal as a whole and not only in fragments—"disposition" in this sense, whether attained by study or by innate power, is too often rejected by the Romantics, to their great loss.

These are the essential features of all Romantic art ; beyond this, it is futile to pursue resemblances between particular poets, to attribute a common purpose to such deliberate individualists. We can but watch, in each case, the fresh application of these fundamental principles ; we shall see how liberty and exuberance are the source of one man's strength and of another's weakness, and how the term Imagination covers a host of different meanings, serving each poet to describe his own mental processes, his attitude to his art. Above all, we shall notice one significant fact : the comparative failure of the French Romantic poets. It is only in the achievement of their great English contemporaries that the new principles are alive and fruitful.

The purest and most concentrated expression of the extreme Romantic doctrine is to be found in certain maxims of Blake—the *Proverbs of Hell*, the *Notes on Reynolds*, from which quotation has already been made. (His view of poetry is an essential part of his view of life. Imagination, for Blake, is a mystical faculty, revealing "the real and eternal world of which this Vegetable Universe is but a faint shadow"; it is the life of the spirit, to be lived, moreover, here and now, and not only after death; it is that intuition which enables us—

"To see the world in a grain of sand
And a Heaven in a wild flower,"

and of which we deprive ourselves when we trust to our senses and to Reason, which is founded on sense-knowledge. "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up till he sees everything through the narrow chink of his cavern.")

Imagination is identified with, or includes, all vital spiritual qualities—love, faith, courage, energy, desire; and Reason, its antithesis, with all that stunts and sterilises spiritual activity; with the cowardly prudence that restrains desire, and the puritanism that condemns it, breeding hatred and misery: "Prisons are built with stones of law, brothels with bricks of religion." Art is "the tree of life," the fairest and directest expression of the imaginative communion with the infinite, and in art as in life "exuberance is

beauty." The rules and principles of tradition are "the destroyers of Jerusalem"; Classical art is "mathematical form," the product of the arid reason, Gothic art is "living form"; the Classical principle of unity is "a cloak for folly"; the preference for the general over the particular a sign of idiocy. Blake eventually went to the extreme of rejecting all metrical bondages, even that of blank verse: "poetry fettered fetters the human race"; *Jerusalem* anticipates the revolt of the *vers-libristes* and of Claudel.

Individualism, with Blake, becomes anarchy, a dangerous state in art. He rejects all traditional thought, and builds up his own philosophy, personal and intuitive, expressing it in a chaos of enigmas which are satisfying neither intellectually nor æsthetically. Where he is not forcing imagination to do the work of reason, however, his poetry has the rare quality of absolute freshness, purity and intensity; it is to be apprehended, as it was created, only by direct intuition.

With Wordsworth, imagination has something of the same mystical character; like Blake he could see "a Heaven in a wild flower"; but his imagination never cuts him off from contact with human life, and his poetry, if it lacks the remoteness, the strange thrill of Blake's, has a strength and sanity which mystics too often lack; his wild flower has firm roots in earth, and running sap. Blake felt the difference, and disapproved: "I see in Wordsworth the natural man rising up against the spiritual man continually, and then he is no poet, but a heathen philosopher. . . ."

In many ways, Wordsworth escapes from our definition of Romantic poetry ; he lacks fire and passion in the ordinary sense ; he avoids excess in expression ; he hated the "degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation" which marked the morbid Romanticism of the late eighteenth century. But other, and equally fundamental, aspects of the movement are exemplified in him. He is perhaps the most complete individualist of all Romantic poets, save Blake alone. He dwelt apart, shunning the world, and striving to attain a purer vision of things than that which satisfies society. Imagination is for him this faculty of direct vision—the "things of everyday" are revealed in their essential beauty to eyes freed from "the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude" ; and at the same time, the poet must communicate his vision to his readers in all its vividness and purity. Wordsworth rejects all that may interfere to blur this integrity, all false ornaments and irrelevant associations, all the conventional attributes of poetry. His well-founded dislike of the artificial poetic diction of the eighteenth century leads him to condemn all but the barest language, the common prose of everyday. His own practice at its best confutes this extreme conclusion of his theory, but he was unaware of the discrepancy ; the poems which appear to us wholly puerile and prosaic are often those which he himself prized most, through insufficient self-criticism, no doubt, but also through extreme self-centredness—he was so intent upon his own experience that he did not

take sufficient pains to communicate it ; the bare, matter-of-fact words served to revive in him the original emotion, and he never doubted but that they would have the same effect upon his reader.

Wordsworth's poetry is not fiercely passionate, as we have said ; his feeling is none the less deep and intense, and the simplicity of its expression makes its appeal the more direct and poignant. "Emotion recollected in tranquillity" is his own description of the poetic process, and it explains the peculiar strength and serenity of his best poems, whether on the most trivial or on the most tragic themes.

But where the emotion has been allowed to cool, where the vividness of the original experience has faded, Wordsworth's lack of self-criticism once more betrays him ; he loses control, and lapses into prosy moralising, into a tedious exposition of his philosophy "engendered," as Keats protested, "in the whims of an egotist." His shorter poems had unity—the imagination had conceived them as organic wholes ; but in the longer ones he lacks the technical skill to conceal the gaps between poetic passages, and his padding is of the most obvious quality ; like the other Romantics, he has neglected, to his cost, the lessons of discipline and artistry.

Wordsworth's friend and best critic, Coleridge, stands in strange contrast to him. The *Lyrical Ballads* show them starting on divergent paths, the one striving "to give the charm of novelty to things of everyday," the other to transfer to

the romantic and the supernatural "a human interest and a semblance of truth." Wordsworth's experiment was the more deeply significant, but Coleridge works his miracle with unquestionable triumph. *The Ancient Mariner* is, as Mrs. Barbauld sagaciously remarked, "improbable"; but the weird world it conjures up for us has a vivid and startling concreteness, a sharpness of detail, that does indeed win for his "shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief that constitutes poetic faith." Here are the strangest elements of medieval legend and travellers' tales absorbed, enriched and made alive by "that synthetical and magical power," the Romantic imagination. And in *Kubla Khan*, the shattered fragment of an opium dream takes on such splendour, such an illusion of mysterious meaning, that the charmed spirit does not ask for truth.

Coleridge, it would seem, became a magician only when himself under the influence of a spell; and the disproportionate deal of dross in his poetic production betrays the rarity of these enchanted moments. His power of incantation at such times may be resented but not resisted; its secret lies in his mastery of rhythm and music, and of all the suggestive and pictorial possibilities of language. Small wonder if he defended metre and poetic diction against the attacks of Wordsworth!

The two great poets of the younger generation are inseparably linked in the popular mind; and yet in their attitude to life and art Keats and

Shelley differ profoundly. In each there lives again something of the Renaissance spirit; the old enthusiastic reverence for poetry flames up afresh—but in each with a different significance.

With Shelley, idealism is carried to the point of mysticism. "Poetry," he declares, "makes us the inhabitants of a world to which the familiar world is a chaos"; and it was only in its purer air that he could really breathe at ease; to escape from life, as Mary Shelley tells us, he "delivered up his soul to poetry, and felt happy when he sheltered himself from the influence of human sympathies in the wildest regions of fancy." But he was no spiritual coward taking refuge in dreams; the sight of the world's chaos strung him to ardent revolt against all the injustice and cruelty of society; and his idealism bred a firm faith that "wisdom, courage and long-suffering love" would ultimately triumph, and that the "Spirit of Beauty" which he worshipped would "free this world from its dark slavery." And in this mission of enfranchisement Poetry would play her part; Imagination is "the great instrument of moral good," quickening and expanding man's sympathies. Here is the old belief in the didactic aim of poetry, widened and deepened.

Shelley's whole life illustrates his tragic persistence in an individualist idealism—his refusal to accept ordinary human values, to make contact with reality as we know it. In the conflict of a single human spirit with society, the individual must succumb. But in his poetry he is free to

refashion the world on the pattern of his dream ;
and his idealism explains the very texture of his
verse, its essentially symbolic character. There
 is a constant interplay of the abstract and the
 concrete ; ideas take shape in an ever-shifting
 train of images, while analogies for concrete
 objects are sought in mental processes—the
 objects of the external world are valued less for
 their own loveliness than for what they suggest :

“ But from these create he can
 Forms more real than living man,
 Nurslings of immortality ! ”

an attitude which we shall see deliberately adopted
 and carried to an extreme by the French poets of
 a later generation.

The unceasing ferment of his imagination sets
 him writing with extreme rapidity, in order to
 secure each vision before the gleam has faded from
 its wings ; he allows no interval for “ recollection
 in tranquillity,” since “ when composition begins,
 inspiration is already on the decline.” Hence
 the diffuseness and incoherence, the frequent
 irregularity of metre and incorrectness of ex-
 pression which mar his work : that wasteful
“ lack of self-concentration ” with which Keats
 reproached him (“ you might curb your magnani-
 mity and be more of an artist, and load every rift
 of your subject with ore ”). But to this immedi-
 acy of expression are due, also, his supreme
qualities, the brilliant freshness and transparency
of his imagery, the airy rush of his music ; and
when these are no longer squandered on a con-

fused allegory, but gathered together by the force of emotion in a single lyric, the result is poetry of the purest and most exquisite order.

Keats was no less firmly convinced than Shelley of the supreme importance of poetry; but his reverence for his art takes a different form. There is none of the clamorous ecstatic idealism about it of Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*: Keats is neither mystic nor fanatic, but a very human creature, with normal tastes and feelings keyed up to an unusual intensity, and the divine gift of imagination; who, conscious of his high calling, ambitious to excel in it, faces his task with a profound seriousness and takes stock of his powers and failings. In the early *Sleep and Poetry*, he expresses these intimate desires and fears, and foretells, in an allegory, the poet's progress he hopes to accomplish—a theme which recurs, more deeply pondered and more insistent, in the revised *Hyperion*. And the Letters of 1818–1820 reveal his rapid spiritual development—his thirst for extensive knowledge, his desire to do "some good for the world," above all, his deepening sense of life's tragedy and mystery, his sympathy for human suffering; the supreme height of wisdom can be reached only by—

"Those to whom the miseries of this world
Are miseries, and will not let them rest."

To this weighty maturing of mind and spirit corresponds a deliberate process of severe self-criticism and conscious artistic endeavour. Thus he denounces the immaturity and "mawkishness"

of his *Endymion*, and gathers up his strength anew for the creation of "verses fit to live." "I have written independently and without judgment; I may write independently and with judgment hereafter. The genius of poetry must work out its own salvation in a man; it cannot be matured by law and precept, but by sensation and watchfulness in itself. That which is creative must create itself." So he learns "self-concentration"; he prunes and orders his early luxuriance, learning from Milton, from Dante; he loads "every rift with ore," condensing, refining and enriching the texture of his verse. And the noble purpose which he pursued and, to a considerable degree, accomplished, marks him out as the one Classical artist among the Romantics—in the truest sense, of an independent, self-disciplined Classicism, like that of Milton.

One other point wherein he differs from his contemporaries is his objective use of his emotional material. Wordsworth noted his "fits of passion" with faithful directness; the French Romantics, as we shall see, poured out their hearts; Shelley "idealised" his emotions (see Mrs. Shelley's Preface, 1839), but his lyrics are essentially subjective; he interprets nature in terms of his own feelings. Keats, in his Odes, on the basis of a strong, concentrated emotion builds up, by choice allusion and rich imagery, a structure of independent beauty; while in the revised *Hyperion* there are signs that deep thought, as well as emotion, is to be used in this way.

When we turn to the Romantic school of

France we are conscious of a difference in atmosphere that is not merely racial ; something important is lacking here, and at the same time something impure has crept in. Not that this imperfection was noted, at the time, by Frenchmen ; the Romantic poets from Lamartine to Hugo met with opposition from the traditionalist, of course, but with eager acclamation from a nation starved for poetry. Yet the rapidity with which the school fell into disfavour, and the limited appeal it makes to-day, compared with the enduring fame of the great English Romantics, are significant.

One cause of the inferiority of these French poets is their too quick assimilation of certain dissociated elements of Romanticism, their failure to rise superior to these elements, to achieve a fusion of them with the aid of that supreme imaginative power defined by Coleridge ; indeed, neither in theory nor in practice do they approach a profound understanding of that faculty ; they stop short at its more obvious forms. Only with Chateaubriand was this imaginative fusion effected ; his successors reproduce his separate beauties, weakened or exaggerated, and they inherit meanwhile from him, as he from Rousseau, that taint of morbid self-consciousness which is the corruption of Romantic individualism.

Thus, they revel in the picturesque, the exotic ; but the stimulus never touches them as deeply as it touched Chateaubriand or the greater Coleridge ; the poetry it produces is brilliant and superficial—Hugo's showy medieval and

oriental scenes, the glittering trifles of Théophile Gautier. They desire *le merveilleux*, and are satisfied with cheap theatrical devices ; they experience no genuine shudder at contact with the unknown ; the monstrous conceptions of Hugo cannot convince us like *The Ancient Mariner*, and only the minor poet Gérard de Nerval ever entered the threshold of the dream-world. (It was left to a later generation, the Symbolists, to feel with sudden and intolerable intensity the "burden of the mystery," and to make this experience the foundation for their poetry.) The French Romantics turn to nature, and each is stirred at times to exquisite description ; but there is no consistent intensity in their relation to her—they lack the piercing vision of Wordsworth, the transforming idealism of Shelley or the exaltation of Keats ; nature serves merely as a decorative background for self-portraiture. And even their expression of personal emotion, perhaps the most vital thing in French Romanticism, turns too often to sentimentality or to rhetoric ; the fatal strain of egotism, of mingled self-pity and arrogance, distorts their feelings. Meanwhile their vaunted liberation of form remains incomplete ; while losing the closeness and *justesse* of the Classical ideal, they do not escape, any more than the Classical poets did, from false eloquence and padding. They claim to bring a new music into French verse ; but the music is too facile or too loud, not closely enough connected with an intimate imaginative experience : poetry becomes a diffuse oratorical flow ;

“ Le mouvement étant devenu l'élément essentiel du discours poétique, il importait relativement peu qu'on le nourrît avec n'importe quoi, pourvu que ce fût sonore et entraînant. . . .”

(Claudél : *Positions et Propositions*.)

They might have profited by the example of English poetry, for the Anglomania of the eighteenth century persisted ; they worshipped Shakespeare in place of the dethroned Classical dramatists, but they did not grasp his secret. They remained ignorant (except Sainte-Beuve) of their great English contemporaries ; the new movement in England, for them, was represented by Scott's novels and above all by the poetry of Byron, which seemed to them as it did to many Englishmen, and as it still does to most foreigners, the *ne plus ultra* of Romanticism. The glamour of Byron's personality and his career was reflected in his verse ; his attitude to life—his passion and energy, his theatrical individualism—were exactly what appealed to the popular taste, while the deficiencies of his poetry, its rhetorical emphasis, and the frequent blatancy of its music, were no bars to a foreign reader, who would feel beneath these the poet's real power and fire.

By the time Byron was known in France, however, the new school of poetry was already launched. The triumph of Lamartine's *Méditations* in 1820 was due to the way in which they expressed and so satisfied the vague yearnings of two generations of Romantics ; prose, even the gorgeous poetic prose of Chateaubriand, could not

render these feelings with the same harmonious purity. Poetry had been so long artificial, strait-laced, that nothing short of undisguised subjective lyricism would answer the emotional needs of the post-Revolution generation, with nerves all on edge. Lamartine's verse is a gushing stream of sentiment. As a boy he had day-dreamed over Ossian on a mountain-side, composing in his head "des poèmes aussi vastes que la nature, aussi resplendissants que le ciel, aussi pathétiques que les gémissements des brises de mer dans les têtes des pins-lièges." At last with maturity and experience there came to him the power of self-expression : "Ce n'était pas un art, c'était un soulagement de mon propre cœur, qui se berçait de ses propres sanglots. Ces vers étaient un gémissement ou un cri de l'âme. . . . C'est là le véritable art ; être touché ; oublier tout art pour atteindre le souverain art, la nature."

These lines contain the whole of Lamartine's *poétique*. Fortunately nature had endowed him with a gift for music, fluent and delicate, if monotonous, in his own phrase, "mélodieux murmure embaumé d'ambroisie," with which to express his intimate emotions, his reveries and his memories. Lamartine's early poems have a haunting charm composed of music and melancholy and the vague sensuous suggestion of natural forms and sounds ; and in the late *La Vigne et la Maison* he displays an imaginative intensity, a concreteness of description, that are most unusual. Meanwhile, however, he overwrote himself pitifully ; the facile melody flows on

("Lamartine," said Flaubert, "est un robinet")—sometimes more richly orchestrated, but without the old freshness, and grows insipid through repetition; the exquisite evocation of atmosphere gives place to hazy Turneresque landscape, the "cri de l'âme" to pompous didacticism. Vigny's description of the dreary *Jocelyn* might apply to Lamartine's work as a whole—"des îles de poésie noyées dans de l'eau bénite." His utter inability to check or correct his work had disastrous results on its value as a whole, and now that his vague sentimentality has ceased to enchant us, we must consider him rather as a warning than as an inspiration.

Alfred de Musset serves as another; in him a potential artist was lost, thanks to the conception of poetry as "a cry of the soul" which he shared with Lamartine. He lived the typical Romantic life, a series of emotional crises; and he held that intensity of feeling was enough in itself to create great poetry. Says the Muse to the Poet in *La Nuit de Mai*:

"Une larme de toi ! Dieu m'écoute : il est temps . . ."

The inevitable result of this attitude to his art was an exaggerated effusiveness of sentiment, a fatal facility in expression; he aims at appealing only to the emotions of his public: "Vive le mélodrame où Margot a pleuré." And yet he was capable of concentrated poetic beauty, as much of the *Nuit de Mai* bears witness; such lines as

"La rose, vierge encor, se referme jalouse
Sur le frelon nacré qu'elle enivre en mourant,"

have a sensuous richness and delicacy that he attains too seldom ; his art remains fragmentary, his " beaux jets " wasted.

Musset had a sense of humour, unlike most of his *confrères* ; although he never used it in self-criticism, he directed it against his contemporaries, satirising the extravagances of other Romantics in his delicious *Lettre sur les Adjectifs*. Romanticism in its more pretentious forms, which in France quickly became organised and categorised, made no appeal to him ; all the movement meant for him was freedom and encouragement to live passionately and to pour out his passion in verse.

The hectic tone, the hysterical self-revelation and self-pity which mar much of Musset's poetry and which endeared him to his contemporaries, provoked a violent reaction from the next generation, from Flaubert and the Parnassiens. Meanwhile a contemporary, Alfred de Vigny, showed his disapproval by the exercise of emotional restraint in his own verse ; personal unhappiness, with him, becomes fused with a wider, more philosophical sorrow, with admiration and pity for suffering humanity ; the Byronic defiance against an unjust fate, without the Byronic passion. Vigny is commonly described as the only thinker of his school ; but his thought is only emotion generalised and turned reflective. He differs from the other Romantics in his attitude to his art ; he avoids direct self-expression—this is in itself a fine gesture of individualism ! He seeks to

render his ideas objectively, through parables ; yet the "synthetic imagination" fails him, and the fusion of symbol and idea is never complete or adequate ; the poet's voice is heard raised to point the lesson.

It was Vigny's deep respect for his art that made him resent its being used as "un déversoir à passion," in Flaubert's phrase ; for in his system of pessimism tempered with idealism, the poet was the supreme representative of the indomitable Promethean human spirit :

"Le vrai Dieu, le Dieu fort est le Dieu des idées."

And if his achievement is inferior to his intention, it is because the noblest thoughts and feelings do not suffice, in themselves, to make great poetry. Vigny has some exquisite passages ; *La Maison du Berger* is scattered with them, down to its lovely close :

"Pleurant, comme Diane au bord de ses fontaines,
Ton amour taciturne et toujours menacé,"

while the sober grandeur of some of his parables, and the austere beauty of phrase in which, at times, he expresses his intense, yet restrained emotion, make a deeper appeal than the more showy and declamatory art of his contemporaries. Yet Vigny is not a finished artist ; he is often stilted and clumsy, and he does not make up for his lack of Musset's fire or Lamartine's easy grace with any consistent energy or vigour. Moreover, his inspiration is limited in scope and easily exhausted. There is something

appropriately melancholy in the final impression we receive from his poetry: it is that of a sensitive artist, dissatisfied with the poetic ideal of his day, but powerless to create a substitute.

The crowning glory of French Romanticism, however, by common consent lies elsewhere. André Gide, when asked to name the greatest French poet, is said to have replied "Victor Hugo, malheureusement." To dispute this verdict we should need to define poetic greatness, a task beyond our present scope. But the regret which qualifies it is significant.

Hugo stands as a momentous warning of how a man may have the strength of a giant, the fertility and variety of nature herself, and all the technical skill art can require, and yet fail to satisfy our inmost needs. He appears, at first, to have achieved for French poetry almost singlehanded all that our great Romantics did for England. He freed language from conventional trammels, substituting for the narrow, abstract poetic diction all the resources of an amazingly rich vocabulary. He recreated versification, defiantly abolishing arbitrary conventions, and showing himself master of all metrical forms, from the slight lyric to the magnificently orchestrated *strophe* and couplet-sequence. He possessed, above any of his contemporaries, an inexhaustible faculty for the creation of images. He triumphantly vindicated the right of the imagination to treat all themes, even the extravagant, the horrible and the grotesque. He excels in all styles, from

simple directness to gorgeous magniloquence, from delicate grace to furious invective. What can be done with words that Victor Hugo has not done ?

It would be absurd to deny the greatness of his achievement, to be blind to the singular beauty and power of much that he has written. Yet, at the same time, an intimate conviction warns us that this imaginative vigour is not the highest form of "imagination," that this splendid equipment is devoted to the service of a mind and sensibility of second-rate quality. Certain glaring faults reveal the man. He is extravagant, over-emphatic ; he rarely lets a telling phrase, a vivid metaphor, stand alone, but he spoils their effect by amplification and anti-climax ; he sacrifices quality to quantity, and the beauty of individual passages is lost in a torrent of sonorous nonsense. His lack of taste is betrayed by the grotesque absurdity and impropriety of much of his imagery ; smug silliness cannot go much farther than this :

" Et toutes les blancheurs sont des strophes d'amour ;
Le cygne dit : lumière ! et le lys dit : clémence !
Le ciel s'ouvre à ce chant comme une oreille
immense . . . "

while his love of cheap rhetorical effects is shown by his abuse of certain stock devices, such as enumeration and antithesis. Of the latter one mild example will serve, from the *Tristesse d'Olympio*, one of his finest poems :

" Il contempla longtemps les formes magnifiques
Que la nature prend dans les champs pacifiques ;
Il rêva jusqu'au soir ;

Tout le jour il erra le long de la ravine,
 Admirant tour à tour le ciel, face divine,
 Le lac, divin miroir."

The verse opens splendidly ; but the last two lines give us no direct imaginative experience, only an empty and obvious conceit ; and we need only to remember Wordsworth's "uncertain heaven received into the bosom of the steady lake" to feel the difference. And these defects of Hugo's do not arise merely from that exuberance and dislike of discipline which he shared with other Romantics : they are more deeply rooted. His "criticism of life" is puerile ; his favourite figure, the antithesis, sums it up. In spiritual matters he sees no shades between pitch-black and snowy-white, and thinks he is being wise and profound when he exaggerates the intensity of these extremes. One does not expect a poet to be a metaphysician, but Hugo fancied himself as a "penseur," and his philosophy is the flabbiest idealism, conveyed in emphatic truisms and a glitter of images. One expects at least, of a poet, sincerity and intensity of feeling ; but Hugo's emotions are rarely free from the taint of self-consciousness, and even in his most genuine expressions of love or hatred, joy or sorrow, the *poseur* intervenes, and a false note of rhetoric or sentimentality makes the whole thing jar.

Hugo worshipped words—

"Car le mot, c'est le Verbe, et le Verbe, c'est Dieu,"
 and the poet, as master of words, is priest

and prophet ; this is one of his favourite themes. In greater men a sense of their high vocation bred humility as well as ambition ; Hugo, who is spiritually and intellectually inferior, considers himself as a chosen vessel, inspired by God with a message to mankind—

“ Expliquant la nature à l’homme qui l’ignore,
Éclairant toute chose avec votre clarté,”

a being apart, “ le rêveur,” “ le mage,” greater and wiser than his fellows, whom the forces of nature admit of their kin :

“ Arbres de la forêt, vous connaissez mon âme !
. . . Arbres, vous m’avez vu fuir l’homme et chercher
Dieu ! ”

Hugo went on for many years pontificating ; in temper as well as in time he offers, perhaps, a closer parallel to our Victorian bards than to any of the Romantic pioneers. Heresies, meanwhile, sprang up around him ; he was magnanimously interested, but he remained impervious to their influence. Whatever may be the final verdict of posterity on the poets who succeeded Hugo, it will at least include gratitude for their efforts towards a purer conception of art than that which he imposed and represented.

CHAPTER V

AFTER ROMANTICISM

“ Pour n'être plus les esclaves martyrisés du Temps, enivrez-vous, enivrez-vous sans cesse ! De vin, de poésie ou de vertu, à votre guise.”

—*Baudelaire.*

THE Romantic movement in England had triumphantly effected the divorce between Poetry and Society, between the world of imagination and the world of common experience and common sense ; and the enthusiasm that possessed Romantic pioneers had made the separate life a possibility. Poetry required no other substance than the visions and passions of the individual, clothed in the rhythms and images that were of the very texture of his own mind. But as the century grows older, the gulf between art and life grows even wider, this happy self-sufficiency, this self-confidence are shaken ; the trend of civilisation towards materialism and ugliness, the growth of science and rationalism, the hardening of social conventions and the narrowness of the moral code, are in direct antagonism to the idealism, the cult of beauty, of imagination and of liberty which were the soul of Romantic poetry. The history of Victorian poetry is a series of struggles, often tragic, towards a readjustment of art to life or an escape

from life to art. There is never again the same powerful and easy flight into the upper air, the same transfiguration of reality by the pure light of imagination, that were so miraculously accomplished by the great Romantics.

There is not, either, any vigorous attempt to solve anew the poetic problem. The splendid production of Romanticism seemed to have opened up all the ways for future development ; the Victorian age produced many fine poets but no vital revolution in the conception of poetry. With English independence, poets go their own way, adopting certain Romantic principles, assimilating certain Romantic influences and rejecting others ; there is rarely any common ideal, any concerted effort. Only in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood can we see any approach to a literary " school " ; even here the ideal is hardly a consciously formulated one, nor is it consistently realised, being, rather, a transitory bond of sympathy, a community of impulse.

= The two giants of Victorian poetry, Tennyson and Browning, so opposite in mind and art, are alike in two respects. They carry on the English tradition of writing each his own type of poetry, undisturbed by new movements and theories, devoid of theory themselves ; each is a Romantic of the second generation. And both fail to satisfy, for us at any rate, that other pressing problem of the adjustment of art to life. Perhaps a certain amount of poetic theory, a more clear-sighted analysis of his own powers, would have saved each of them from grave error.

The tragedy of Tennyson is familiar to us ; the sensitive, introspective poet, made for lyric utterance, with his gifts of lovely description and verbal music, in whom misguided friends instil or foster a notion of his "mission," of the "divine purpose" which he must further ; the old doctrine of didacticism revived with mid-Victorian solemnity, but without the wider significance which Shelley had given it. So Tennyson became "the bard," the Laureate, compromising with his age because he lacked the force to govern it, purveying to his public the flattering unction of shallow optimism and idyllic sentiment which their souls desired.

His poetic ideal, as his practice reveals it, marks no new departure from established traditions. He has none of the Romantic intensity or energy ; the level dignity, the polish of his verse, like those of his master Virgil, entitle him rather to be called a Classical artist ; and yet the plaintive, intimate note of much of his poetry is an echo of Romantic lyricism.

The art of Browning may appear at first to introduce a new, revolutionary factor into the conception of poetry. Yet it is only an extreme, but logical result of Romantic individualism, of the poet's licence to create his own form, expressive at every turn of his idiosyncrasies ; and of his disregard for the intellectual reach and æsthetic susceptibilities of his public. He is Romantic in his lawless use of language, and in his negligent craftsmanship ; while the passion for the grotesque, which outweighs with him the

love of beauty, is in itself a product or a perversion of Romanticism—witness Victor Hugo. And Browning's whole "philosophy," with its stress on energy and liberty and on intensity of emotion, develops the Romantic view of life. Yet he is not a pure Romantic ; living in an age of novelists, philosophers and preachers, he tries to combine all these functions with his natural lyric impulse ; and he lacks the intense imaginative power that could have fused such heterogeneous elements. Diversity of aim and want of control are his undoing, and above all that insistent sermonising, which delighted his generation, has lessened his significance for ours.

Tennyson's artistic compromise with tradition was happy ; his spiritual compromise with Victorianism was a disaster. Browning, in art, was an unchecked individualist ; while to his age he was a bullying but popular preacher. In equal contrast to both these poets stands the work of the one great Victorian who deliberately formulated his ideal, and in whose verse the mental agony of this post-Romantic generation finds its most sincere expression : Matthew Arnold, critic and scholar, whose voice was raised in 1853 to denounce the aimlessness and formlessness of contemporary art and to propose a remedy. There is nothing new about Arnold's conception of poetry, which is derived from his study of the Classics ; and moreover it proves a misleading guide to much of his own work. He repudiates Romanticism, with its antecedents and its posterity ; its vague dissatisfaction with

life seems to him sterile and morbid ; its art is wild and fragmentary, its style extravagant. He urges a return to the serene balance of the Ancients, to the Classical discipline in choice and use of subject and in structure, and to a Classical simplicity and severity of style. These principles, hardened into dogmas, led him astray occasionally in his critical judgment of particular poets ; as a cure for the something rotten in the state of mid-Victorian poetry, they remain an impracticable ideal, unrealised by others as by himself.

It is interesting to watch the application of his principles to his own work. They induced him to reject *Empedocles* despite its Classical theme and form ; for since writing *Empedocles* he had decided that " no practical enjoyment can be derived " from situations " in which the suffering finds no vent in action " ; morbid in themselves, they become monotonous in art ; and the subject of his poem was a situation of this sort. Moreover, he had learnt from Aristotle that poetry is " an imitation of an action," not " an allegorical representation of the state of one's own mind," as it was with the Romantics ; and there was something too much of Arnold's personal doubts and griefs put into the mouth of *Empedocles*. Yet one must side here with Arnold the poet against Arnold the critic ; for the characteristics he condemns in *Empedocles* recur throughout his work ; some of his best poems are frankly subjective, and their prevailing note is one of sadness—the disillusioned tone of

Empedocles' monologue, though without its desperate conclusion.

It was well, in theory, to preach a Classical revival ; Arnold was too much of his age to bring it about—

“ The infection of our mental strife
Which, while it gives no bliss, yet spoils for rest,”

precluded any return to the serenity and sanity of the Greeks. And yet, at times, something of the inspiring influence of the Greek spirit seems to lift him out of himself and above his generation ; he is an unequal artist, too often merely preaching in prosaic doggerel ; yet ever and again he achieves that Classical dignity and austerity of style, that grandeur of imagery and loftiness of thought which were his ideal, and revives the music and the ecstasy of the Greek lyric in his response to the beauty of nature. In certain ways, Arnold is akin to Vigny ; there is the same disillusionment relieved by stoic courage and deep pity, the same emotional restraint, the same awkward sobriety of style relieved by precious touches of imaginative beauty ; and each poet felt out of tune with his generation and cried in the wilderness against them. The influence of Vigny can be traced in his successors ; Leconte de Lisle, founder of the Parnassiens, intensifies his pessimism and impersonality. But Arnold had no disciples, and no ally save Clough ; his tentative Classicism met with no response.

Meanwhile a more alluring call than his was heard ; a young band of artists and poets, in

revolt against the materialism, conventionality and ugliness that ruled in their England, promised fresh sources of beauty, sensuous and spiritual, to revive fast-perishing Art. The principles of the Pre-Raphaelites are formulated by Rossetti as "realism, emotional but extremely minute"—the Romantic devotion to particulars and the Romantic faith in the transforming power of passion and imagination, given a new, sophisticated turn. Rossetti inherits Keats's sensuous delight in beauty and, like Coleridge, he can convey the haunting terror of the world of mystery and dream; William Morris turns for inspiration to the Middle Ages, to the days of direct action and primitive passion, when the earth's beauty was unspoilt and man's vision of it clean and clear. The fine ideal of the Pre-Raphaelites, the high poetic value of their work, makes their ultimate failure the more disappointing. For this apparently vital new current of poetry led only to a backwater, a pleasant place to dream in, but strangely remote from life. Was the only alternative to a degrading compromise with their age this resolute escape from it into the closed garden of Rossetti, with its exotic beauty and its heavy atmosphere, or Morris's care-free Medieval paradise?

One other poet, linked by friendship to the Pre-Raphaelites, was like them in revolt against his age, but with a wilder defiance. "A pseudo-Shelley," was Arnold's contemptuous description of Swinburne; we must resent the doubt cast on his originality and the double insult that,

on Arnold's lips, the comparison with Shelley implies ; still, between the rebel of the 'sixties and the rebel of the 'twenties, there is an undoubted kinship. Swinburne exaggerates the Shelleyan technique, the haziness of imagery, the reliance on suggestive sound to convey the idea ; he was as fluent as Shelley and far less varied. He degraded his Muse too often by simulating a morbid sensuality which had no basis in experience—a pseudo-Baudelaire ; he lost his inspiration and his independence, which neither Baudelaire nor Shelley could have done. His poetry once stood for spiritual and artistic emancipation : an extrinsic merit which means little to us, whose needs are different. Swinburne at his best is, like Lamartine, an extreme embodiment of the latest French fetish, "pure poetry"—sound achieving its end without the aid of sense.

And so, in England, the impulse of Romanticism persists throughout the century, and its ways and aims are revived alike by those who truckle to their age's civilisation and by those who reject it. In France, the need to settle the relation of art to life, of imagination to reality, is felt just as acutely ; but the Romantic poets had not solved the problem, and their failure left their successors free and eager to work out their own answer in new ways.

The French Romantic school had soon divided into two camps : the sentimentalists, who harped insistently on the single string of their own emotions, and who thought the poet's "mission" was to soothe the sufferings of humanity by the

relation of his own ; and the artists, concerned only with technical experiment and with brilliant word-painting. Hugo, master of all trades, belonged to each in turn ; his *Orientales*, flashy jewels of descriptive and metrical virtuosity, inaugurated the "picturesque" school ; but he soon seceded, finding its scope too limited. It was left to a young disciple, the flamboyant Gautier, to elaborate a theory of art on the basis of *Les Orientales*. Gautier was primarily a painter, with a keen sense of form and colour ; Romanticism meant for him only the revelation of the beauty of concrete things, "je suis un homme pour qui le monde extérieur existe." To express this visible beauty in an impeccable verse form was his sole aim in art ; he offers his impersonal, objective vision instead of the self-expression of the other Romantics, his clear concreteness, his laboured polish, instead of their vagueness and "inspired" fluency. He is the first exponent of "art for art's sake," vehemently opposing all suggestion of an ulterior motive for poetry, of its didactic or consolatory purpose. But Gautier, by reaching perfection in such a limited field, set poetry on a wrong track. For his skilled craftsmanship cannot disguise the essential triviality of his themes. And yet, at this time, his lesson seemed immensely important ; his doctrine of "art for art's sake" was adopted by the next generation, who saw in it an escape both from the morass of sentimentality into which Romanticism was slipping and from the sordid materialism of existing society. Art must create

something independent of life, formal beauty being its only end and its sufficient justification. The novels of Flaubert and that illuminating commentary provided by his letters show how this exclusive devotion to art may cut off the artist from life in the deeper sense, and how this severance tends, in its turn, to mortify his work ; and the closest poetic parallel to Flaubert is offered by the Parnassiens.

With Leconte de Lisle, heir at once to Vigny and to Gautier, the principles of objectivity and artistic discipline assume a new significance. He has all Flaubert's hatred for the indecent self-revelation of the Sentimentalists ; he will not "gore his best thoughts" :

"Promène qui voudra son cœur ensanglanté
Sur ton pavé cynique, ô plèbe carnassière !
. . . Je ne danserai pas sur ton tréteau banal
Avec tes histrions et tes prostituées."

(*Les Montreurs.*)

He brings a new strength and splendour to descriptive verse, and a rigid stateliness to versification. But he aims at more than the perfecting of pretty trifles ; he desires to give poetry a new dignity by "marrying her to science," by bringing her into contact, not with direct human experience, but with the thought of his time. So the theories and discoveries of Comte and Renan are made the basis for his brilliant narratives and pictures ; the *Poèmes Antiques* and *Poèmes Barbares* are monuments of archæological accuracy. There is something perverse about

this union of scientific and imaginative truth, the Parnassien attempt to adjust art to life; Flaubert's exhaustive researches for *Salammbô* are disproportionate to the ultimate value of the book, and the real value of Leconte de Lisle's poetry lies in its purely plastic qualities and in the suggestion of a powerful emotion, restrained, generalised and infinitely sad, that pervades his elaborate myths and panoramas.

Among Leconte de Lisle's disciples the only one to preserve the tradition in its integrity was José-Maria de Heredia; but this last of the Parnassiens bears less resemblance to his master than to Gautier—a Gautier of exotic race and with a wider culture. He draws from the annals of the past no themes for philosophic meditation, but a handful of striking tableaux with some slight symbolic significance, which he engraves within the narrow limits of the sonnet; to an extremely vivid visual imagination he joins a power of compression and a mastery of verbal sonority that make his *Trophées* things perfect of their kind. But it is a limited kind; the artist for art's sake has triumphed once more at the expense of the deeper spiritual values.

// The overthrow of the Parnassien ideal, after this last manifestation, was to be rapid and complete, and that which replaced it with the Symbolists in every respect its antithesis. Meanwhile a single poet, working in that isolation which, however rare in France, is perhaps necessary nowadays for Art to preserve her integrity, achieved a fusion of all poetic qualities which,

before and after him, were dissociated : the perfect form which, an independent disciple of Gautier, he had developed, served to express an individual experience more peculiar and intense than that of any Romantic.

(Baudelaire), a tortured and perverted spirit, was for ever seeking respite from the *ennui*, the world-weariness and self-loathing that obsessed him—for ever haunted by the vision of an inner world of mysterious beauty. "Spleen et Idéal"—half the *Fleurs du Mal* are grouped under this title, and it tells the whole of Baudelaire's tragic story. His "spleen" was a blacker poison than the "mal du siècle" of the Romantics ; his ideal more acutely apprehended, more desperately desired than theirs. His longing to escape "anywhere out of the world" often takes the form of a dream-voyage ; the image of a ship haunts his pages :

"Notre âme est un trois-mâts cherchant son Icarie,"

and the scent of his mistress's hair or the sound of music sets him wandering towards those unattainable shores. In verse of strange splendour, and in his rich poetic prose, he describes his reveries and his hallucinations ; his power of seeing through the real world to this immanent Paradise approximates to the mystic's communion with the infinite : "Le Temps a disparu ; c'est l'Éternité qui règne, une Éternité de délices !" But the rapture fades, the illusion is shattered ; and the sordid horror of reality, "ce triste monde engourdi," "ce séjour de l'éternel ennui,"

is brought home the more painfully. With bitter irony he contemplates the wreck of his dreams : " O le pauvre amoureux 'des pays chimériques ! " Then, in despair and in revolt, he extracts a morbid delight from his own agony and from the evil that surrounds him, finding in these an unexploited mine of terrible beauty.

In this conflict of " spleen " and ideal lies the secret of Baudelaire's æsthetic theory and practice. Poetry is for him the supreme means of transmuting pain into pleasure, of making beauty blossom from the poisoned soil :

" . . . Quand saurai-je donc faire
Du spectacle vivant de ma triste misère
Le travail de mes mains et l'amour de mes yeux ? "

and of fixing his visions ; Art is the chief province of his mysterious ideal world, for in the work of art alone does the ideal take a permanent and concrete form.¹ Nature, to Baudelaire, is essentially ugly and stupid ; civilisation, virtue itself, are the product of incessant and intelligent human effort. Beauty lies only in the artificial ;

¹ We must notice here the possible influence on Baudelaire's thought of the critical theories of Edgar Allan Poe. The exact relation between these two, as artists and as theorists, is a problem still unsolved ; temperamentally, they had much in common, and Baudelaire's sympathy and applause were largely responsible for the exaggerated prestige which Poe's poetry continues to enjoy in France. Poe's criticism says little that Coleridge and Shelley had not said before him ; but in France " art for art's sake " had not yet received the support of an idealist philosophy, and Baudelaire, champion, after Gautier and Flaubert, of æstheticism, fastened on Poe's formulas and incorporated them into his own fuller and profounder synthesis.

his *Éloge du Maquillage* has this wider application, and the formal perfection of his work,

“ . . . Mes vers polis, treillis d'un pur métal
Savamment constellés de rimes de cristal,”

is due not to any sterile love of virtuosity but to this insatiable idealism.

And this elaborately artificial verse is incandescent with an inner fire; the traditional rhythms communicate a music hitherto undreamt of, majestic, voluptuous, poignant; words are chosen for their sonority and their sensuous appeal which at the same time diffuse an aura of suggestion.

“ Fortes tresses, soyez la houle qui m'enlève !
Tu contiens, mer d'ébène, un éblouissant rêve
De voiles, de rameurs, de flammes et de mâts :
Un port retentissant où mon âme peut boire
A grands flots le parfum, le son et la couleur ;
Où les vaisseaux, glissant dans l'or et dans la moire,
Ouvrent leurs vastes bras pour embrasser la gloire
D'un ciel pur où frémit l'éternelle chaleur.”

(*La Chevelure.*)

His poetry does not merely crown a tradition ; it contains the germs of future development. His successors were to cherish his visionary faculty, his strange suggestive images :

“ Mon cœur est un palais flétri par la cohue . . . ”

“ Ainsi dans la forêt où mon esprit s'exile
Un vieux Souvenir sonne à plein souffle du cor . . . ”

“ Et les vagues terreurs de ces affreuses nuits
Qui compriment le cœur comme un papier qu'on
froisse . . . ”

His apprehension of the secret affinities between our various senses, revealing some spiritual unity, is the very essence of Symbolism :

“ Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent
 Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité,
 Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,
 Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.”
 (*Correspondances.*)

His follower Laforgue, and in our day Mr. Eliot, have revived something of his sophisticated irony, and that startling use of bathos, of sudden grotesque metaphor and abrupt phrase, which marks the crash of the ideal at contact with reality :

“ . . . Derrière les décors
 De l'existence immense, au plus noir de l'abîme,
 Je vois distinctement des mondes singuliers,
 Et, de ma clairvoyance extatique victime,
 Je traîne des serpents qui mordent mes souliers . . .”
 (*La Voix.*)

Baudelaire evolved his conception of poetry as a partial solution for the problems of his own life, disregarding the society of his time except to loathe it, and to horrify it by flaunting his “satanism” and morbidity; and these, the least attractive features of his poetry, were the most easily imitated by scores of “decadents” on both sides of the Channel.

But with the Symbolists, the idealism which was so personal and intimate a part of Baudelaire's poetry was brought into relation with contem-

porary thought and became the basis of elaborate æsthetic theories. The positivist philosophy of the earlier generation asserted the right and power of the intellect to comprehend and explain the universe ; and the poetry of the Parnassiens, the novels of Flaubert and the "naturalists" had reflected this detached scientific attitude. By 1870 the public faith in positivism was somewhat shaken ; Spencer, Hartmann, Schopenhauer brought in the notions of inexplicable phenomena and unconscious forces, and of the illusory nature of reality ; the young intellectuals of France, steeped in these ideas, grew vividly aware of the weight of mystery that surrounds life, and eagerly welcomed all forms of art that conveyed the sense of this. The fascination of the supernatural and of the dream, which the French Romantics had felt only fitfully, and which is so much more familiar to the Teutonic than to the Latin mind, was revealed in the prose of Nerval, of Edgar Allan Poe, of Villiers del'Isle-Adam and of Barbey d'Aurevilly ; by an extreme development of the principle of "willing suspension of disbelief," the actual world appears less real than the world of imagination ; created phenomena are taken as symbols of the ideal.

In poetry, all elements that appeal too exclusively to the rational and sensual man are rejected as impure ; poetry must speak, like music, to that obscure and intimate part of us where ideas and feelings and sense-reactions are interchangeable. The influence of Baude-

laire could only be accepted purged of the rhetoric, the realism, the precision which he had inherited with his regular form from the poetic tradition ; and other poets were discovered who had ventured farther than he into the world of dreams and visions, and who had more consistently cut themselves off from the world of fact.

The most accessible of these masters is undoubtedly Paul Verlaine, that luckless, feckless creature who ran the whole gamut of miseries and humiliations, moral and physical, to end his days as a disreputable oracle in the Paris cafés, representing to the young decadents and *révoltés* of his time the poetic temperament *par excellence*. This belated and factitious glory has dwindled to-day ; though the charm of Verlaine's poetry is indestructible, his influence is dead.

Intimacy and suggestion, as Mr. Nicolson has remarked, are the characteristic virtues of Symbolist art ; and in these two qualities lies the whole secret of Verlaine's poetry. He began, strange as it may seem, as a disciple of the Parnasse ; but he soon escaped from its artificial atmosphere to find his true voice in subjective lyricism. Then came the tragic interlude of his adventure with Rimbaud, the wild fierce boy, "ange et démon," who tried to mould the weaker Verlaine to his own pattern, "le rendre à son état primitif de Fils du Soleil," and then threw him off, battered and broken, with cruel contempt. His contact with this savage visionary drew out Verlaine's essential poetic gifts : his power of indirect suggestion by sounds and

vague images, of transmitting the atmosphere of his mood by mingling dream and reality, feeling and sense-impression, so that the thing described is a symbol, an analogy to the intimate emotion :

“ L'ombre des arbres dans la rivière embrumée
Meurt comme de la fumée,
Tandis qu'en l'air, parmi les ramures réelles,
Se plaignent les tourterelles.

Combien, ô voyageur, ce paysage blême
Te mira blême toi-même,
Et que tristes pleuraient dans les hautes feuillées
Tes espérances noyées ! ”

From Rimbaud, too, he learnt to loathe the conventional forms and rhythms of poetry, to give his verse the naïve cadence of a popular song, the supple freedom of the spoken phrase, the fluid charm of music. In his *Art Poétique* he tells his preference for these freer rhythms, for the *vers impair* :

“ Plus vague et plus soluble dans l'air,
Sans rien en lui qui pèse ou qui pose, ”

lines admirably illustrative. He protests against the traditional tyranny of the *rime riche*, that artificial ornament, “bijou d'un sou” ; and against intellectual wit and rhetoric, to which the French mind is particularly prone. Poetry deals in suggestion rather than in precise statement, in subtle nuances rather than in hard

bright colours ; it must be, above all things, musical, and make its appeal in the same way as music, arousing day-dreams and undefined emotions : " et tout le reste est littérature."

Verlaine's peculiar accent, being so individual and elusive a thing, was not easily imitable ; his chief claim to fame with the younger generation lay in accomplishing, with a gentle nonchalance, a truer liberation of prosody than that so loudly boasted by Hugo. And yet his reform was not complete enough to satisfy those in whom he had stirred the spirit of revolt ; he had not wholly abandoned rhyme : he had rested content with a *vers libéré*, they were to experiment with the *vers libre*. His pleasant and very personal compromise, however, serves as a stepping-stone to the study of the more abstruse Symbolists and especially of the two whose accomplishment was the most startling and whose influence to-day is still vital—Rimbaud and Mallarmé.

Arthur Rimbaud has been called, by his greatest heir Paul Claudel, "un mystique à l'état sauvage" ; and indeed he had naturally and to an intense degree that visionary faculty which Baudelaire had cultivated as a means of escape and which the Symbolists sought as a key to Truth. Rimbaud is the strange and terrible Messiah to whom Blake's "Devil" is prophet ; he displays "all the fury of a Spiritual Existence" ; with him Energy and Desire are manifestations of the fierce vitality of the imagination. From earliest childhood (witness *Les Poètes de Sept Ans*) he had dwelt in an inner world of fantastic

beauty ; *Bateau Ivre* bears us tumultuously through its perilous seas. Contact with "reality" aroused in him an angry loathing, an impulse to trample on all conventional beliefs, all accepted human values and accredited virtues ; the deliberate brutality of his early poems reflects this desire, and his treatment of Verlaine was a cruel realisation of it. Then, after racing through experience, "départ dans l'affection et le bruit neufs" ; spurning civilisation, he sought to exploit his passionate energies in action and adventure by the "fleuves barbares" for which he had yearned, the "grand désert où luit la liberté ravie" of his first dreams.

He left a precious legacy, *Les Illuminations*, *Une Saison en Enfer*, which mirror his strange visions ; reason here gropes bewildered, but we are won in its despite by the astonishing power that these fragments reveal, by the flashes of loveliness that relieve their ferocity ; by the haunting charm of his lyrics, above all by the enchantment of his poetic prose, with its subtle modulations of sound and rhythm. The essential secret of his genius he could not transmit ; but the new conception of poetry that he evolved and illustrated has acted as a powerful leaven in French literature. His poetic method, described as "alchimie du verbe" in the *Saison en Enfer*, reveals his attempt to recapture and communicate that vision of a "super-reality," as his disciples have called it, that can only be attained when the imagination is dissociated

from reason and from custom. For this communication he would create his own medium : "avec des rhymes instinctifs . . . je me flattai d'inventer un verbe poétique accessible, un jour ou l'autre, à tous les sens. J'écrivais des silences, des nuits, je notais l'inexprimable. Je fixais des vertiges." He practised deliberate self-hypnosis, to lull asleep the rational faculty : "je m'habituai à l'hallucination simple ; je voyais très franchement une mosquée à la place d'une usine . . . un salon au fond d'un lac. Je finis par trouver sacré le désordre de mon esprit." He claimed to be "maître en fantasmagories," to create "de nouvelles fleurs, de nouveaux astres, de nouvelles chairs, de nouvelles langues," to attain "des secrets pour changer la vie." A fantastic ideal ; for that way madness lies, as he discovered : "par une route de dangers ma faiblesse me menait aux confins du monde et de la Cimmérie, patrie de l'ombre et des tourbillons" : and this in part explains his sudden defection from art, his subsequent indifference to his writings and their fame. The *Adieu* of the *Saison en Enfer* is significant ; it shows him on the verge of seeking elsewhere the secret of that "vraie vie" of which he had at times such vivid intuitions. "Nous sommes engagés à la découverte de la clarté divine. . . . Et à l'aurore, armés d'une ardente patience, nous entrerons aux splendides villes . . . et il me sera loisible de posséder la vérité dans une âme et un corps."

In the chaos of theory, experiment and con-

troversy that reigned in the 'eighties, the influence of Rimbaud may be clearly traced. His dream of a "verbe poétique accessible à tous les sens," his claim, "j'inventai la couleur des voyelles, je réglai la forme et le mouvement de chaque consonne," were taken literally and elaborated by René Ghil, whose *Instrumentisme* aimed at giving language a musical value entirely independent of intellectual association, determined by laws of harmony as strict as those of the sister art, having moreover definite colour-suggestions (Baudelaire's "correspondances" were in part responsible for this). "Le poème ainsi devient un vrai morceau de musique suggestive et s'instrumentant seul." Not to chronicle the thousand *-isms* that have pullulated since his day, and looking only at contemporary literature, we find that the discoveries of psycho-analysis have invested his work with a new significance. From one point of view, his secret lay in giving full and free expression to his subconscious self ; and the Surréalistes to-day, with their automatic writing, their wild fancies and "fantasmagories," their arbitrary and illogical association of images, claim to be following his example ; the pity is that none of them seems to have as interesting a subconscious self as their master, that "le désordre de leur esprit" has proved less fruitful than in his case. The Freudian view, however, has its adversaries, for there are still mystics in France ; and for Paul Claudel the ecstasies, the visions, the *vertiges* of Rimbaud have another meaning. And indeed, many of Rimbaud's

utterances have that rare intense ring which is the after-echo of a mystical experience : " O pureté ! pureté ! C'est cette minute d'éveil qui m'a donné la vision de la pureté ! Par l'esprit on va à Dieu ! "

But whether or not we accept Claudel's explanation, we cannot doubt that in his own poetry is revived something of Rimbaud's imaginative fire and something of his music ; while the modern poet's *Réflexions sur le vers français*, with its justification of the "rythme instinctif," offers a precious clue to his own free verse and to the poetic prose of his predecessor. Rimbaud's influence, however, is more far-reaching still ; it has permeated every corner of modern literature. He is in no small degree responsible for that expansion of the poetic consciousness, so typical of modern times, that refusal of fixed standards of beauty ; he had despised "les célébrités de la peinture et de la poésie modernes," and found inspiration in the oddest by-paths of art. "J'aimais les peintures idiotes, dessus de postes, décors, toiles de saltimbanques, enseignes, enluminures populaires ; la littérature démodée, latin d'église, livres érotiques sans orthographe, romans de nos aïeules, contes de fées, petits livres de l'enfance, refrains niais, rythmes naïfs." This deliberate exaltation of the trivial, the quaint and the absurd has resulted in much affectation, but it has also provided a valuable stimulus and a safeguard against conventionality and narrow-mindedness. What Frenchman before Rimbaud had felt the charm of nonsense or

woven "refrains niais," with magical success, into his lyrics? Moreover, the modern *wanderlust* and thirst for liberty, if hardly due to Rimbaud's influence, are, at least, clearly heralded by him; he is a champion of individualism more aggressive, more implacable than any of his Romantic forbears; and above all, his life and his writing bring to youth an irresistible conviction that poetry is an inner force which works in a mysterious way, a vision and an enchantment, and that rhetoric and convention and *la raison raisonnée* are its most insidious enemies.

While Rimbaud, oblivious of his fame, ran his wild career in foreign lands, an independent, quiet revolution was taking place in the Paris drawing-room where Stéphane Mallarmé held court. Mallarmé is the extreme exponent of idealist doctrines applied to poetry. He shared Rimbaud's conviction that "la vraie vie est ailleurs : nous ne sommes pas au monde"; it was no rich fantastic paradise of his own imagining that haunted him, however, but a world of ideas, of absolute perfection, compared with which creation is imperfect and illusory; in the words of his disciple Valéry—

"L'univers n'est qu'un défaut
Dans la pureté du non-être !"

Mallarmé is fascinated by the non-existent; to quote M. Thibaudet, "son œuvre correspond, dans l'art poétique, à ce que sont, à l'autre pôle, les mathématiques des quantités négatives." His

poetry is built up on ideas of negation : absence, silence, death¹ :

“ Ma faim qui d’aucuns fruits ici ne se régale
Trouve en leur docte manque une saveur égale.”

For him, as for Baudelaire, intellectual and artistic creation alone can produce something purer than existing reality, representative of the Ideal ; and to seize his vision of the absolute, to communicate it by the suggestive beauty of words, is the high and hopeless task assigned by Mallarmé to the poet. The sense of its impossibility obsessed him, kept him brooding over his blank paper ; it is the constantly recurring theme of his verse. But in his pure, unswerving pursuit of his goal he evolved the singular technique which has made his name memorable.

Images taken from created phenomena, and appealing to the senses, are, inevitably, the material with which the poet expresses his experience ; but they interest him not in themselves, but as symbols of the Ideal. We have seen this attitude in other poets, notably in Shelley ; but with none was it so constant and deliberate as with Mallarmé. And haunted as he was by a “ démon de l’Analogie,” apprehending, like Baudelaire, secret affinities between the impressions of different senses, he invariably looked beyond sense to the spiritual region in search of the essential Idea which these impressions all reflect ; and he endeavours to

¹ An effect only paralleled in English by Donne’s *Nocturnal on St. Lucy’s Day*.

communicate that Idea by a subtle evocation of sense-images.

He shuns direct statement, definite meaning :

“Exclus-en, si tu peux,
Le réel, parce que vil.
Le sens, trop précis, rature
Ta vague littérature.”

His art is, in its essence, allusive, oblique. He transmits his impression of things, the emotion they caused in him, without ever describing or defining them ; he exploits, to this end, all the magic of suggestive sound, all the associations set up by words or images. He is obscure, because he will not be pinned down to a “sens trop précis,” and because of the subtlety and complication of his thoughts, of his train of associations. This obscurity is enhanced by deliberate ellipses and distortions of syntax, due to his desire to purify the poetic medium, language, from its vulgar and rhetorical elements, “donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu.”

A group of words, deliberately chosen and ordered, have mutual repercussions of infinite suggestive power, and form, synthetically, a new unit : “le vers qui de plusieurs vocables refait un mot total, neuf, étranger à la langue et comme incantatoire” ; just as a phrase in music is far more than a mere sequence of notes.

Mallarmé, unlike Rimbaud, bowed to the traditional rules of French verse. Music as artificial, as calculated as his, demands a basis of pre-established symmetry to show up all its

delicate effects. And to-day his intellectual heir, Paul Valéry, has accepted the "chaînes volontaires" of regular verse, and remains its most convincing champion. Whether this aspect of Mallarmé's influence is likely to be permanent, it is impossible to say: regular verse is in disfavour with the modern school, yet it is hardly likely that so well-proved an instrument will ever be utterly discarded.

Mallarmé's intellectualism won him many followers among the theorists of Symbolism; indeed, he may be said to have founded the school. To-day it is rather for his artistic achievement that he is revered, for the nobility of his ideal and the scrupulous integrity with which he pursued it; for his ceaseless probing into the mystery of words.

If I have dwelt on these French poets to the neglect of their English contemporaries, it is because of the still unexhausted significance of their experiments. Victorian England knew no revolution of such magnitude, produced no poet whom the modernist regards with reverence as a pioneer. It is rather to France—to Baudelaire and his successors—that Mr. Eliot owes certain aspects of his art; and we have, for better or worse, our own Surréalistes. Moreover the self-consciousness, the deliberate experimentalism which marks much modern writing, is, as we have seen, more characteristic of the French than of the English tradition. Such critical activity often, though not inevitably, covers a lack of creative genius; this may be the case with us

to-day, yet we need not despair, for English poetry has proved in the past its Phoenix-faculty. Meanwhile it may console our national pride to reflect that the essential factors in the new French view of poetry have long lain latent and unformulated in the work of English poets ; that imaginative intensity, prosodic freedom, and the suggestive power of words are our ancient and treasured heritage, and no startling theoretic revolution was needed to impress us with their importance. The Symbolist movement was, moreover, an infusion of foreign blood into the French tradition. The sense of mystery, of *le rêve* and *le merveilleux*, came in the first place from abroad ; and several minor Symbolists were of northern extraction. Mallarmé was an assiduous student and profound admirer of English poetry, and in his treatment of language he was undoubtedly striving to emulate its methods. Baudelaire, as we have noted, owed something to the doctrines of Poe ; and Mallarmé came under the same influence, reflected glory being thereby cast on the American ; while the Surréalistes find their own beliefs anticipated in Poe's analysis of the "fancies" and visions that attend the half-awakened consciousness.

We have watched French poetry, through the course of the nineteenth century, shedding, first, sentiment and rhetoric, then realism and precision, emerging finally as the communication of an intimate spiritual experience through suggestive sound and symbolism. It has gained, in the process, a greater intensity and purity than anything

yet known in France ; has it lost nothing ? Scepticism sometimes assails the English reader, who wonders, weary of intellectual strife, whether Ronsard with his genius and his commonplace doctrines was not worth all these wild-goose-chasers ; whether Ronsard's poetry, breathing the full joyous life of the Renaissance, is not more precious than the wild hallucinations of Rimbaud and the esoteric enigmas, the abstractions of Mallarmé ? And yet the path taken by poetry seems inevitable, and need not be regretted. Art interprets life indeed, but after her own laws, and not into the language that he who runs may read ; the artist's vision of life is at once deeper, clearer and more complex than ours. The nature and purpose of poetry have been variously explained throughout the ages ; but it has always been credited with the mysterious power of transfiguration. Rimbaud and Mallarmé do not desire to escape from life but to find life, to preserve the brightness of their own vision ; that is why they shun the common ways of thought and feeling and speech. Perhaps some day a poet will arise (there have been such poets in the past, as we in England need not to be reminded) whose integrity will be no less, but whose sympathies and knowledge will be wider ; in whose generous and penetrating view of life the modern consciousness will be absorbed and interpreted.

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